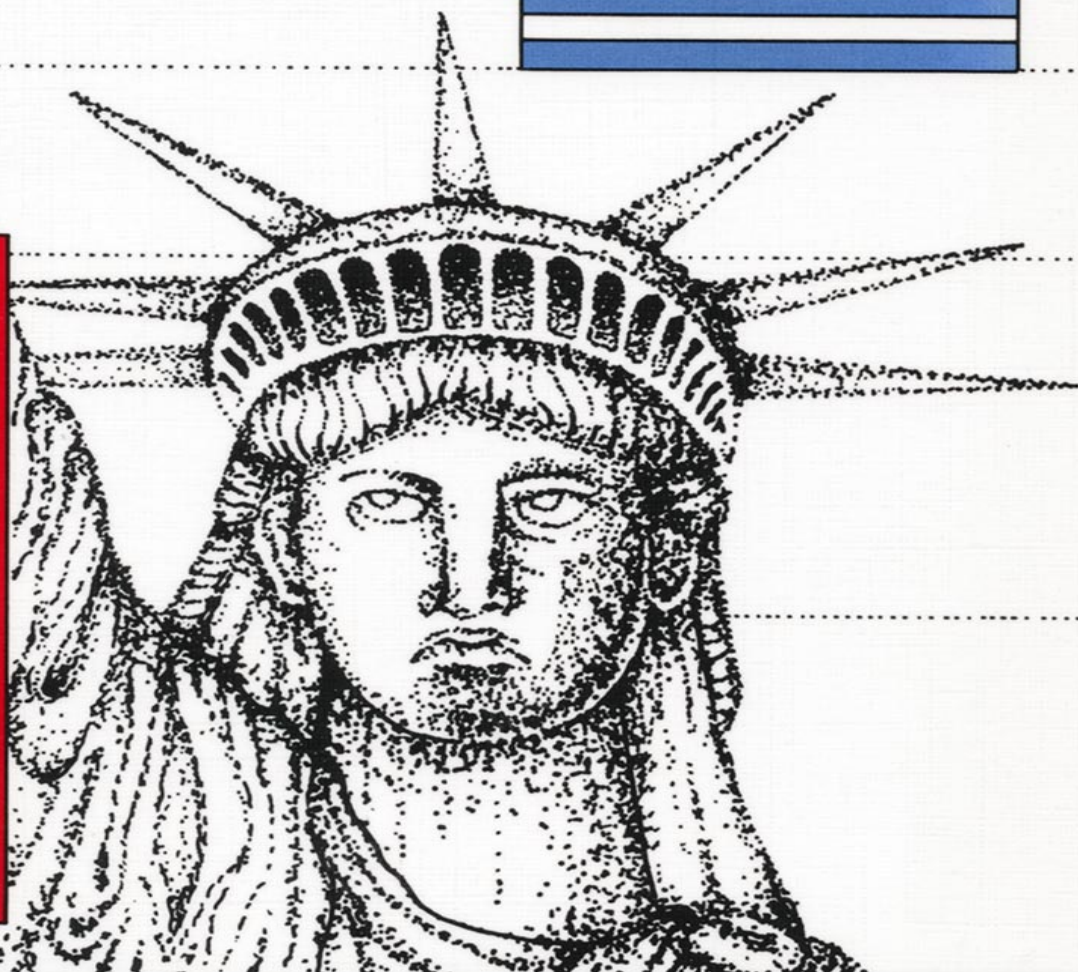
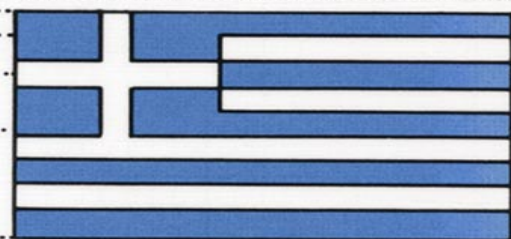
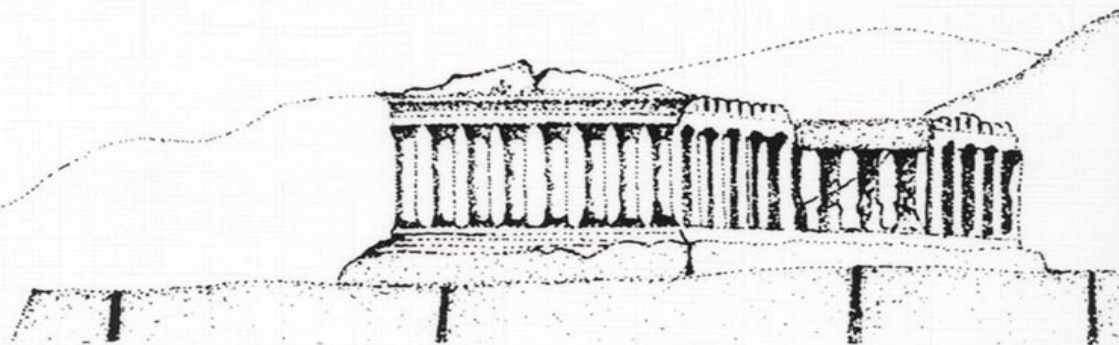


Journey to Eternity

The Life of Michael C. Metskas



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Special thanks to my grandson, Gregg Kenneth Oltman, for designing the cover of my book.

To my daughter, Mary, for when she became ill I began writing... she was an inspiration to me.

Introduction

“When I was a child, I thought as a child...” But I am ninety-five now, and my thoughts and visions of the world are quite different. Fifty years ago, the first half of my life was over. My wife and I and our first three children were settled in a suburb of Chicago. I owned a barber shop and was reasonably established. I was at a point in life when people could begin to reflect on life and so I began this autobiography.

It would be untrue to say that the contents of this volume will propel it to Best-Seller lists or make it a candidate for the Pulitzer Prize. What I have tried to do here is to share with you my memories of a life lived. Without any excessive concern for literary style or art form, I have recounted some of the events of my years and the way I recall feeling about them. I have fulfilled a simple desire to share with you some of the heartbreak and laughter that has made up my life. I am as proud of this autobiography as a mother is of her baby.

Perhaps others who shared these events with me, whose lives crossed mine, would recount the events differently. But that is their story. This is mine, my life as I recall having lived it, my life as I recall having loved it.

Michael C. Metskas

Chapter One

“Why am I so harsh with my words towards you, my sons? There must be a reason; let us check things over and see what it is.”

First of all I shall check on myself and see how I grew to be a young man. My life-long dream of writing my autobiography actually began in August of 1935, after my daughter Mary took sick, and I could do nothing else or rest without putting my mind to work. I relied on my children, Pete, George and Mary to proofread my writing, correct the grammar, punctuation and spelling, and then finally to type it page by page. This project, of course, took many long and tedious sessions and at times the boys were slow in responding, and I felt that they were being lazy. So, naturally, I let them know it. Looking back now, I realize that young people are not always interested in what the “older generation” has to say and that my children were only being like youngsters everywhere. I must admit that I am very proud of the time, effort and interest that my children spent in seeing that this goal of mine became a reality. The times of being frustrated or annoyed with them and their performance have evaporated as the years went by.

Often I refer to scripture passages. The Bible is very dear to me; it contains words of wisdom that directed my every footstep in life. “...And God created man in His own image and likeness and because God loved man, He gave his commandments that are good for man and God kept doing so right along through the prophets...” There is no one intelligent enough nor strong enough spiritually to go along without reading the Bible. And now, here is my story.

I was born May 15, 1891 in a small farming village in Slimnitsa in Macedonia, Greece. In the 1890’s, however, geographic boundaries were different and so it was known as Macedonia, Turkey. My mother and father, Christos and Eleni Metskas, were blessed with twelve children, eight boys and four girls: Nick, Michael, Dimitri, Olga, Pavlo, Spiro, Pandeli, Alexandra, Athanacios, Maria, Sophia and Kosta.



My mother, Eleni, and father, Christos, and six of my brothers and sisters.

Since I was second oldest and began working at a very early age, I have no recollection of growing up with my brothers and sisters. In those days and in that world, work was not always available in your own village and often a child would leave home early to seek employment in far away places. As a result, I was seldom home. Of the twelve children, three of us eventually made America our home. Now, only my brother Spiro, who is 87, and I are still alive.

At the age of five, I began school together with my brother Nick who was about a year older.

In Slimnitsa and the surrounding villages, we all spoke a Slavic dialect in our everyday conversations. But when we entered school it was altogether different, for we had to learn another language: Greek. School was hard work from the very start. There were no swings, blocks or finger painting to introduce us to learning. It was rules to be memorized and regulations to be followed. It seems very harsh to a reader today, but if we did not obey, we were reprimanded with a slap across the face or beaten with a switch. It did not take us long to cooperate and buckle down to serious study. But it wasn't mainly fear of being punished or insulted that made us get down to hard work..., it was the honorable thing to do.

I can clearly remember that the first four grades were all held in one room with a male teacher at the head. The pupils were all boys, since in those days, girls did not attend school. Instead, they stayed home and were taught by their mothers to cook, sew and clean to prepare them for motherhood.

In the first grade I learned my alphabet and numbers. It was in the second grade that I first heard of the Ten Commandments of God. Even at such an early age I remember questioning the Fourth Commandment, "Remember the seventh day, to keep it Holy." That commandment presented a problem for me because I knew that according to the calendar, the seventh day was Saturday, not Sunday. In my young mind I was confused. Why were we celebrating the Lord's day on Sunday? Who changed it from Saturday to Sunday? I can still recall that no one was able to give me a satisfactory answer at that time.

It was also in the second year of my schooling that I became very sick. There were no provisions for medical and health care in the village. When a child became ill, everyone worried. I remember my mother sitting beside me crying for fear that I too was going to die. Not long before that, she had lost two children, younger than I. I'm sure that she thought that I would die also. I couldn't stand seeing my mother crying and I felt terribly sorry for her and my grandmother and wanted to get well. I also remember my mother sitting alongside of me knitting stockings for my burial. I asked my mother to make me a bourek (a pie with a flaky crust and a cottage cheese and egg filling). That was one of my favorite foods, and after I ate it, I closed my eyes and fell asleep. Suddenly I heard my mother screaming. Her loud cries awakened me. She thought that I was dead, not asleep. When I opened my eyes I saw a vision of three persons on the ceiling that looked to me like women dressed in holy costumes and making decisions. I was picking up strength right along and it came to me to tell my mother and to assure her that I was not going to die. So I told her in this manner: "Mother, don't cry, I am not going to die. I am getting up tomorrow." I can't understand what that vision meant but it remains as vivid today as it was some eighty-nine years ago. Perhaps I dreamt it. Whatever it was, I feel that event had a strong impact on my life. Since then, I have appreciated and cherished every new day that God has given me.

In my estimation, my mother was a most special woman, one who would sacrifice anything and everything for the sake of her children. She was left with the sole responsibility of the farm, to maintain the household and to raise the children. When I talk about my Mother and Grandmother, you might wonder why I don't say anything of my Father. Well, in that part of the country, the father went to work in other countries, sometimes in Greece and other times in Bulgaria.

My father was seldom home. As a lumberjack, he traveled to wherever work was to be found. At times he stayed away for months at a stretch, but he would always try to make it home to help us during the wheat, corn and lentil harvest. My father was the provider and my mother desperately relied on the little he would send her. Once I dreamt I was in a chicken coop where I stumbled upon two beautiful large eggs, freshly laid. That find was something special because there wasn't an abundance of eggs when I was

growing up. Well, I interpreted that dream of finding two eggs as a sign that something good would happen. I told my mother that we would receive some money from my father. In two days' time, my mother received a letter from my father in which he enclosed a two-pound note, worth considerable money in those days, and we were extremely happy. During the times that my father was away, it was my mother who held the family together and who, therefore, had a profound influence on me and the value that I have always placed in the family.

I remember my father as being very strong, kind, sympathetic and very gifted. He played an instrument called the tamboura, a stringed musical instrument with a large pear-shaped body similar to a lute. He would carve marionettes out of wood and tie them with string to the tamboura. As he played the instrument, the wooden figures danced. Although his work required him to be away much of the time while I was growing up, his love for us was so evident that he always remained a strong influence on me.

I have very fond memories of my grandmother also. I'm referring to my father's mother, Dimana. Her husband, my grandfather, died in his early forties as a result of being thrown off a mule and breaking his back. So my grandmother lived with us. I remember watching her go into the dowry chest and sometimes weeping as she fingered some of her things. If she sensed anyone's presence, she immediately would try to compose herself and continue helping my mother with the housework. Later on in life I realized that she was weeping for her husband whom she missed very much. She carried his love with her until she died, never remarrying.

In terms of money, we were very poor. I walked to school with very little to eat and few clothes to wear. But, somehow, we managed. I found consolation in the Church. Even though I did not understand the doctrines and teachings of the Church, I felt that there is Some One who cares and will never forsake us. I am a firm believer that God never gives us more than we can handle at a time. I was imbued with that spirit and it gave me hope. Little did I know of the problems that lay ahead of me, and the strength of the Holy Spirit that I would need to keep on pushing ahead and bettering my position in life.

It is difficult for me to bring to mind everything that I suffered, everything that I experienced and endured. I was worried and anxious most of the time, but that didn't prevent me from being happy and full of ambition.

My formal education, which lasted two years, came to an abrupt end when I was seven years old. Instead of going to school, I knew that I needed to go out to work and start helping myself and the entire family. I recall one incident after I quit school. I had been given the task of shepherding a small herd of lambs from the village. One early morning as I sat on a hillside waiting to see the beauty of the sunrise, I was approached by my former teacher who was taking his early morning walk. In the course of our conversation, he said, "Michael, you are an intelligent boy. You should be back in school. Please come back to put your mind to work." I looked at him, smiled and turned away. My heart ached. I knew he was right. I wanted to learn more, but we were too poor for me to go back to school. I had to go out to earn money for the family. I never lost my love for learning and education, however. It was always important for me to learn and grow, and while I could not go back to school because of our poverty, I promised myself that I would try to better the situation for my own children when they would come along.

I am so happy when I see you boys go to nice schools that are comfortable and clean, warm in the winter, good clothes to wear, and plenty to eat. Oh! That makes me feel good. In some ways I have fulfilled my own dreams by seeing my children work toward fulfilling theirs.

I assure you that I give thanks to Almighty God, and I am writing this book in the hopes you can appreciate what you have. Have patience. Don't get tired of reading this book. You might think, "What nonsense is this?" But keep going. You will come across common sense and interest. For someday, you may want to know more about your ancestry, and as I go along, I will be able to give you a clear view, I hope.

Chapter Two

“The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep and miles to go before I sleep.”

My very first job, at the age of seven, was a lamb herder. My cousin and I would tend the lambs, watch them graze and guide them safely home in the evening. One day, my cousin and I had a misunderstanding and so we parted our lambs. He took his lambs farther on to another pasture and I was left all by myself. Something happened that day that was to haunt me for several years to come. As I sat by the pathway, swinging my shepherd's staff back and forth, I looked down and saw a rattlesnake at my feet. I got up quickly and hit the snake with my stick, but as the snake was uncoiling, the size of it scared me half to death. I ran as fast as I could to what I thought was a safe place in a wooded area. No matter where I ran, I felt the nearness of the snake, yet could not locate it. I was terrified that any minute it would sneak up and bite me. Frightened and alone, I began to sing church hymns to compose myself. The melodies and words helped to soothe me and, eventually, I was able to start for home.

I was so exhausted from fatigue and fright that I fell asleep right on the kitchen floor next to the fire. It was not long before I awoke screaming and tried to jump out the window. My mother grabbed me and at the same time told my grandmother to get the village priest. When I heard the word ‘priest’, I received courage and told my mother “don’t call the priest, I am alright now.” However, I could not forget this scare and had nightmares about it for about seven years. I was afraid to fall asleep at night.

My grandmother tried many home cures. I didn’t know what they were doing. I remember they used to wash me or give me a shower through a sifter filled with fish. Other times they would get a bottle of medicine. They called it ‘frix’. What it was I don’t know. But the way they gave it to me was to purposely awaken me during my sleep to frighten me and then give me the medicine to drink. I tried to overcome these nightmares but they continued until I found help in the church, or singing church hymns, thinking that there was some power that would take care of me. In that way, I overcame the

terrible nightmares.

I can recall going to the field to till the soil, all done by hand. We, like others in the village, were poor and did not even have oxen to help do the plowing. The digging was done by hoe to cover the seeds in the field. Being small, the field looked so big and, as I was obedient, I had to carry out the orders, regardless of hardship. I would look at the field and think “Oh, all of that to be done by hand in the sun, working from morning to night and no food, but bread, water and onion.” I used to think that someday someone will invent machinery to make work easier.

On one occasion, I helped my grandmother in the field, separating a certain kernel from the wheat. If this wasn't removed, it would cause fermentation in the flour. As a result, anyone who would eat the bread made from this wheat might become drunk. I think my grandmother enjoyed these special times when I'd help her in the field. After work, we'd sit in a nearby field, my grandmother would lay her head in my lap and I'd gently massage her scalp. It was soothing and relaxing for her. Years later, when I owned my own barber shop in America, I would recall those days with my grandmother, because along with haircuts and shaves, I also gave scalp massages.

While working in the fields I learned many folksongs from my grandmother which I still sing today. I don't know if others find the songs as appealing, but they certainly are a source of entertainment and pleasant memories for me. The theme of most of the folksongs usually centered around a young boy courting a girl. After hearing these songs a few times, I was quick to memorize them and it surprises me that I still remember them to this day. I'm sure my grandmother smiles from heaven when I sing them.

Next I was given work as a helper to a village cowboy. Instead of riding horses as cowboys do in the West, we walked and herded our cattle. I mainly took this job to replace my brother Nick, who became sick and was unable to continue working. I recall an experience I had while on this job that could have turned into a disaster. It happened when the herd of cattle I was tending was grazing close to the edge of a forest that skirted our pastureland. A large, ferocious looking dog suddenly appeared from out of the trees. Frightened, I

quickly hid among the cattle, behind a large steer. Lucky for me, the ‘dog’ turned around and disappeared. I ran to the boss and told him of my experience. “Son,” he said, “That was not a dog; it was a wolf.” He immediately took out his gun and went to track down the wild animal.

There were two places that we took the cattle to graze—one was the field by the forest and the other was across the river to a beautiful green valley. It was there that I remember picking delicious strawberries. Just as a particularly fierce looking dog can bring back memories of my encounter with the wolf, strawberry shortcake can bring back memories of warm summer days spent picking wild strawberries as the cattle grazed contentedly nearby.

As most of the days in the field were calm and tranquil, I had time to do some serious thinking. I was certain that there was no future for me in the village. The dream of going out into the world, working hard and making enough money to help my family could never happen in my present surroundings. I knew that I had to look for work elsewhere. At first I thought I might follow my father into the lumbering trade, but I soon realized that my father was well-built and strong, and that I was not able to do the sort of work he enjoyed. I was not so physically built to be able to cut trees and other tasks of a lumberjack. So I knew I would have to move on to something else. Although I was still young, I prayed that God would show me what I should do with my life.

People in our village were very religious, and attended Church services on Saturday evenings, Sunday mornings and holidays. Gee, it was wonderful how I felt after church service. It was something I really wanted to do of my own free will, not just fulfilling my duty of worshipping God.



*Saint Athanasios Church
Slimnitsa, Greece*

Holidays especially stand out in my mind. We would wait for them with so much anticipation and excitement. They were wonderful occasions where the entire family dressed in their best clothes and looked forward to a celebration. Meals that were specially prepared were so delicious, especially after fasting for many days. We danced, sang and relaxed; a welcome change from work and worry. They were truly invigorating times. I guess these special days were so meaningful because there was a certain amount of preparation and sacrifice that preceded the actual celebration. Before we enjoyed ourselves, we had to prepare ourselves by fasting—eating nothing but vegetables and fruit for meals. If these were not available, the fasting diet would consist of bread, leeks and water. We were not permitted to eat any food that came from the flesh of animals, such as eggs, cheese, milk and meat. Even fish was restricted to a certain extent. In preparation for Easter, we fasted for 40 days; for Christmas, it was the same number of days. For the feasts of Saints Peter and Paul, the fast lasted 28 days, and for the feast of the Virgin Mary, 15 days.

A marriage in the village was also a special time for celebration. Everyone in the village and the surrounding area knew that two people were getting married. The feasting actually lasted three days and there was no doubt about a wedding being the most sacred celebration... “What God has put together let no man put asunder.”

There was also a feast on the third evening after the birth of a child, because it was believed that the baby’s fate was set for life at that time. The baptism of the baby took place on the second Sunday after birth and a big family gathering followed. Every holiday that the Greek Orthodox Church recognized was kept holy. To us kids it seemed great. Everybody happy. When I saw my parents happy, my heart leaped with joy. I remember as a young boy getting together with a group of boys, including cousins and friends, two days before Christmas. We would spend the night at one of the boy’s home (like a pajama party), waiting for early morning to arrive so we could go from home to home in the village. We’d wear a colorful braided belt around our waist and carry a jamago which resembled a shillelagh. Very early in the morning we’d go from one house to another in the village and go to the family’s fireplace, stir up the fire with our jamago and say, “May your home be blessed and filled with luck, chickens and lambs.” Then we were given a doughnut similar to a bagel, but with Christmas candy baked in it. The doughnut then would be placed through our braided belt and eaten when we got home. Such practices may seem simple, but they were part of our life and we enjoyed them. No matter where my path led in the years to come, the customs of my village and of my Greek Orthodox faith were to remain dear to me. I would find consolation and strength in them and make them a part of our family tradition, even as far away as Argo, Illinois. Many years later, it would give me great pride to see my children and grandchildren keeping the customs that were precious to me and to my parents and grandparents.

So, as you see, I have very pleasant memories of life in the little village of Slimnitsa. But I had to move on. My mother was instrumental in securing a job for me in a candy shop in a nearby town called Bilisht. The owner, Mr. Karabinas, offered me room and board, but no pay for two years. After the apprenticeship period, I would be an experienced candy-maker and, therefore, would be able to draw a salary. So, in the year 1902, when I was eleven years old, another chapter in my life began.

The day I left for my new line of work was a very heartbreaking experience for all of us. My mother and grandmother were definitely going to miss me; they cried and so did I. We embraced and said our farewells.

The journey to Bilisht was about 7 to 8 hours walking distance from my home. When I reached the town, the reality of my new surroundings hit me. I was alone in a strange land. As time went on, I missed my family terribly and was very homesick. The work was difficult and the food meager. My working day started about 4:30 in the morning. First I started the fire, then walked two blocks for water, carrying two six-gallon cans back to the shop. This was done, day after day, except holidays. The actual candy-making was done in the cellar, which was always filled with smoke. We'd cook the candy in copper kettles—a small one was used for hard candies and a large one for Turkish delight called loukoumi. We made colored-candycoated chick peas. I remember having to keep shaking the pan that was hanging on chains to coat the chick peas evenly. They were the most difficult candies to work with.

Although being apprenticed to a candy-maker was hard work, the boss, Mr. Karabinas, took me under his care. He would always talk nicely to me and offer advice as to bettering myself as a candy-maker. He even allowed me to send my grandmother a box of our best candy for her nameday. In the old country, namedays were celebrated the way birthdays are today. I appreciated his interest in me, but as time went on, I realized that he had a particular reason for being nice to me. It so happens that he wanted me to be his watchdog. I was supposed to spy on the more experienced apprentice, my co-worker, and report any wrong doing. For an 11 year old, that was a heavy load on my shoulders because everything was not honest in the shop and I did not want to be a stool pigeon. I felt uneasy, yet I tried to perform the work to the best of my ability, minding my own business.

The work was difficult and mealtime was the highlight of the day. In fact, breakfast, dinner and supper were the only good times of the day. The rest was work, little sleep and no relaxation or play of any kind. To add to my misery, I was not able to enjoy the bakery across the street that had the smell of freshly-baked bread mingled with that of sweet candy. Mr. Karabinas

would buy a big round loaf of freshly-baked bread, cut a hole in the middle, and fill it with olive oil and sugar. The first time he did this, I thought he was going to share the loaf with the other candy-maker and myself. When he sat down and ate the entire loaf by himself, I was hurt. But it took only one such experience to know that such treats were for the boss, not for his workers.

The only rest we had from work was going to Church on Sundays and holidays. But the boss would also go to church, so I had to get up early in the morning to shine his shoes, and help him put on his coat. Instead of being home enjoying the comforts of family life and homecooked meals, and warmth and friendship of brothers and sisters, I was working hard for a stranger. I knew, however, that hardships would make a man out of me, and that this period of my life had to be endured if I were to succeed in fulfilling my goal in life.

During this period there was political and civil unrest throughout the country. The Bulgaro-Macedonians would rise against the government demanding their freedom from the Turkish rule. The people in the Greek villages were extremely frightened because of the number of regiments of Turkish armies that were ever-present in their midst.

Well, it wasn't long before the revolution broke out.... the Turks burned the villages, killed the men, tortured the children and took advantage of the women. I remember hearing that many women chose to die in their burning home, rather than have their bodies violated. They had to pay a very heavy price to save their honor. I was too young to understand all of what happened, but I quickly learned that war and revolution touches everyone. I felt very proud of those brave women and thought how strong they were to have died so.

In the midst of these uprisings, I was permitted to go home to visit my family on religious holidays, particularly remembering the celebration of St. Mary—August 15. As I was walking toward my village, I was approached by a Turkish soldier who turned his rifle toward me and swore at me. He wanted to shoot me and could have easily, but a higher ranking soldier ordered him to stop. I can still hear the soldier being told, “If you want to shoot, go to the

front or the firing line and kill to your heart's content; never mind killing children." That officer remained in my prayers for many years; I was grateful for my life.

When I got home, my mother and grandmother were so happy to see me alive. They couldn't believe it. I was surrounded with hugs and kisses. It felt so good to be with my loved ones again. When I told my family about the soldier on the road, my mother decided that it was too dangerous for me to return to Bilisht to work. One of her friends knew of an owner of a general store in a nearby town who wanted to hire a young boy. So, I never returned to Bilisht to pick up my few belongings which I had left behind at the candy shop. Now, instead of making candy and carrying water cans back to the shop, I would be responsible for taking care of the store, selling goods and doing general cleaning. In return, I was to be paid one hundred grosh a year (five dollars in American money), plus room and board.

In the new job though, I was still an apprentice and had to live in the shop. When I realized that the sleeping quarters were in the store itself, I knew I was to be a servant day and night. In addition to that, I found myself in a similar uncomfortable situation: I was to report on my fellow clerk's activities. I was responsible for keeping the other clerk honest. If he did not comply, I was to tell the boss, Mr. Doces. The other clerk, Nick, must have realized this, because from the very beginning he was trouble for me. An incident took place one morning soon after I arrived when I was very hungry. I asked Nick, "Don't you eat breakfast around here?" He said, "Go ahead, help yourself." I didn't realize it, but he was actually setting me up, in order to make trouble for me and hopefully to get me fired. When I helped myself to some bread and cheese, Nick immediately reported this to the boss. Soon Mr. Doces was in the room telling me "Son, we only eat two meals a day here." Of course, Nick laughed, and I quickly learned not to trust him. I also learned in due time that Nick wanted desperately to marry the boss's daughter. He went so far as to visit the town's fortune teller, believing her magic or "hokus pokus" would make the girl fall in love with him.

There were many underhanded activities, such as stealing and hiding goods, that Nick was engaging in, but instead of causing trouble for myself, I

pretended not to notice. Eventually, the situation became so bad that I went to him and asked him to stop stealing. One night, during a thunderstorm, the boss got up and went to the second floor to see if the roof leaked, because the rooms on the second floor were filled with merchandise and he did not want them ruined. In a little while the boss came down and woke me up in a rough tone of voice and asked me to follow him. He opened a trunk in my presence to show me articles that were taken from the store that he thought I was stealing. I told him I knew nothing of this. The boss then asked if I knew anything that was going on. I told him I did not know and I did not care to know. But he learned from other people and discovered that he was missing more merchandise. So he looked for the opportunity to give Nick a good beating.

To this day, his action seemed so unreasonable to me. Why a beating? It would have been more appropriate to fire him. But Mr. Doces did not possess good common sense and was a heavy drinker. One night, he came into the room where Nick and I were sleeping, carrying some clubs. All of a sudden, in my presence, he began questioning Nick and started to beat him. I wished Nick would have gotten away from him, because I could not stand seeing him being beaten. The shouts and screams scared me. I feared that a few swings were going to land on me, too. All the while, the boss kept reassuring me that nothing was going to happen to me. After what appeared to be a wicked beating, Nick was able to escape, because the boss was exhausted and Nick finally outmaneuvered him and ran from the room. Since Nick no longer worked in the general store, I was then alone with the boss. I had reason to be afraid. The town was made up of many Albano-Mohammedans and Nick had many friends among them. I feared that they were going to blame me for what had happened. I often heard remarks that they were going to “get even with me”, because they thought I betrayed Nick. I lived and worked for three years in absolute fear, though I didn’t show it outwardly. It was miserable watching and taking every precaution, always being on guard.

I especially feared the night hours, so I made sure that my bed was out of window range, if anyone decided to shoot me. I moved the bed to a safe spot every night after the boss was fast asleep. I didn’t want Mr. Doces to think that the threats of Nick’s friends frightened me. I had no one to confide in, to reason with, or simply to listen to my fears. I could not share this problem

with my mother, because she had enough to worry about and it would only have caused her more suffering and pain. Besides, there was nothing my mother could have done.

Well, I worked in that store for three years not getting the nourishment a young fellow needs; not even three meals a day, but only two. When the boss caught me eating breakfast one morning, which consisted of bread and cheese, he told me that dinner and supper was enough, never mind breakfast. I did not say anything, although in my heart, I knew that he was wrong, because I was hungry and, after all, I was young and growing. When there was nothing else to do but work, I looked forward to my meals and when I was told that I was entitled to only two meals a day that made me all the more hungry. Well, consider please, I only had the meals to enjoy life with, nothing else... no father, no mother, no grandmother, no brother, no sister, no playmates, no games of any kind. That's why I say I felt cheated. That's why I enjoy seeing you boys play. Well, with all that I was going through, I was still full of ambition, full of hope. I thought that I was going to make money somehow, somewhere, and then I would go home and have lots of fun.

I remained working for that Albanian store-owner until I was fifteen. As far as making money was concerned, my dream would never materialize there, so I kept my eyes and ears open for an opportunity to move on.

I received word from my former boss in Bilisht that he would be more than happy to have me back again at more pay, and to learn the trade of candy making. It did not take me long to decide. One day the boss of the general store became intoxicated. He was busy repairing saddles for the mules and forgot to eat dinner. When he did not eat, I did not eat. He would keep on drinking and forgot about eating. Besides being hungry, he scolded me for no reason. I did not say anything, but took my cane and left for Bilisht on foot. It was towards evening and it took me four hours to reach my destination.

This time the old boss greeted me with open arms, saying, "The good boy knows many ways to find himself." He then took me to his home and treated me like one of the family. I felt like the prodigal son returning home. My way of life was more Christian there and I felt better and happier. I was becoming

a fine, healthy, young man of sixteen years of age and started to take life more seriously. This was the year of 1906. That was to be a very special year in my life story, for it was then that I decided to make plans to go to the United States of America.

Chapter Three

The Lord said to Abraham: “Leave your country, your kinsfolk and your father’s house, for the land which I will show you.” Gen. 12:1

I used to listen to conversations about what people used to write about America, how they used to send money, how peaceful and honest the government was. I thought, “where there is a will, there is a way.” I will go to America!

I talked to a young woman named Sophia about my desire to go to America. Sophia was a school teacher in Bilisht and lived with my employer and his family. She was from the town of Coritsa. It seemed to me like time just stood still when I was in her presence. She was willing to give me fifty pounds, which would be comparable to two hundred fifty dollars, if I were to consent to marry her sister. Such arrangements were not uncommon in the old country, and sixteen was not too young to begin planning a marriage. Of course, I felt honored, but I certainly was not ready for taking on the responsibility of caring for a wife. I wanted to save some money before even thinking about getting married.

Since Sophia was a teacher, I sought her advice. She said that many boys from her village had made good in America and was confident that I, too, would succeed. I guess she felt that I was ambitious and was determined. She bought me a Greek/English dictionary, and I started studying it to become familiar with common words and expressions in English, such as Thank you, Please, How are you?, Hello, and What’s your name, etc.

I had to ask my boss what he thought of the idea of going to America. I also had to see if my parents would consent to let me go, for I would not have left without their blessing. So, I started to write letters to my father and mother telling them that I wanted to go to America. I told them I thought I would be able to raise the money. In the meantime, I tried to get my boss’ opinion. He thought it over very carefully. Knowing that there was no future in Bilisht, told me it was a good idea. Although he needed me, he did not try to hold me there, instead, said if I would not be able to raise the money, he would see to

it that I would get it somehow, even from him, providing that I did not forget him. Well, I would like to explain what he meant by not forgetting him. In the old country the custom was, and maybe still is, that parents wanted their daughters married by sixteen years of age. Naturally, they are looking for the right kind of boy. My boss had four daughters, so I understood what he meant by not forgetting him. After all, he and his wife wanted to do the very best for their children. It was an attractive offer, but marriage was definitely out of the question. I never mentioned financing the trip to him again. Instead, I wrote to my father and explained my desire about going to America. My father was very cooperative and wrote me a letter saying he would handle financing the trip for me.

As weeks went by, my father spoke to Mr. Doces, my former boss, about my wanting to go to America, who said he was willing to loan us the money. It was agreed that my father would repay the loan with a seven percent interest payment per month for a period of seven months. After that time, it would rise to ten percent a year. They charged an unusually high rate of interest, because in many cases, like mine, people who loaned money were never repaid. Too many had forgotten the loans they had agreed to in the old country once they arrived in America.

After I was assured of the money for the trip, I made my farewells to Mr. Karabinas and his wife. To this day, I wonder what my fate and life would have been if I had accepted the money he offered me. I most likely would have settled in Boston, since his American contact lived in the northeastern part of the United States. Probably, I would never have set foot in Chicago.

After I left Bilisht, I returned home to Slimnitsa for a few months. Here I found myself the center of attention. Everyone in the entire village shared my joy.

Since I was not scheduled to leave for America for a few months and had grown into a stronger young man, I had a fine opportunity to work side by side with my father in a nearby village cutting down trees for lumber. It was heavy work. All winter was spent cutting down the timber, and in the spring,

the timber that was cut would then be logged to the nearest river. That work certainly was good experience for me, but I was glad to work there for only a few months. I knew that this was not my choice of livelihood.

It was around September, 1907 when I made my plans to leave for America. I remember my father telling me that I probably would fall asleep somewhere, get lost, and never arrive in America. He had good reason to tease me, for I used to fall asleep very early in the evening without eating supper. That was because I was always tired.

My mother was very sad about my leaving home. She cried, “Oh, Michael, I won’t ever see you again if you go to America; no, I won’t see you again.” I tried to reassure her by saying, “Don’t worry, Mother. I won’t forget. I will come back and be with you.” I tried reasoning with her, explaining that I must go so that I could earn a living and help pay the family’s debts. Over the years we had to borrow from many people and as a result owed a considerable amount. Visits from creditors demanding their money were becoming frequent, and we just could not repay them. The lesson I learned from this was that I vowed that I would never spend more than I could afford; I would never borrow money. The old saying, “I’ll stretch my feet no farther than the blanket; if I do, I’ll catch cold,” was to be my rule. Unfortunately, I learned that at times I was unable to live by that wise motto. I did borrow money for my business ventures. As I got older, I realized that sometimes it’s necessary to borrow. Now I realize that my parents would not have borrowed if they didn’t have to.

In the Fall of 1907, around October 15th, the day of departure finally arrived. I had such mixed feelings—torn between worlds—leaving my loved ones behind, charting a new course—all alone. I was 16 years old. My mother cried bitterly and again she said, “Oh, Michael, I won’t ever see you again.” She held my hand so tightly, and desperately clung to me as I bid her farewell. My heart ached when she and I kissed each other for the last time.

My feelings reminded me of the time when the swallows used to come and build their nests right in our vestibule. The nests, which were made from mud, were very pleasing to look at, and were there year in and year out. I

enjoyed the birds very much. They were pretty, and sang so sweetly that I used to sit for long periods of time, watching them, listening to their singing, and seeing them raise their young ones. I wondered if they knew, that when these young birds grew up, they would fly away, and after they flew away, would they have the chance again to see them, to love them, to enjoy them, to care for them, or would the young ones be lost from their sight forever? These thoughts made me feel so sad at times that there would be tears in my eyes.

Of all my memories, the most painful was the day I said goodbye to my mother. Over the years, I have awakened time and again to dreams of her and her tear-filled last words: "I'll never see you again, Michael, I'll never see you again." That made me the more anxious to see that I kept in touch with her often, and kept thinking toward helping her with money after I got to America. I would tell myself... that I had left home in search of something better in a far away land, that all the loneliness and hardship that I endure would be worth it, if I could keep my promise to make their life better.

Finally, the journey began. From the village of Cuteza, I traveled with three older men who also were making the trip. My destination was Chicago because Mr. Doces of the General Store, who loaned us the money, had a contact in that city. On the first night of the trip, in order to economize, we slept in the mountains where mules grazed in the moonlight. I was so excited I could not sleep. I was glad when morning came. We then headed for town on foot and took a carriage to the depot for a train to Salonika. This was the first carriage ride I had ever taken and I was thrilled. But that was only the beginning. I had yet to see a train, a ship and a city! I did not have any idea what a train looked like, nor have I ever seen a picture of one. I was anxious for my first train ride. I wanted to share my happy experience, so I wrote to my mother and father and described in detail my carriage and train ride. I liked the ride, but it seemed to last a very long time, because the train traveled at such a slow speed, yet the thought of not slaving for bosses, having plenty to eat, and getting enough rest, was such a new and happy experience for me.

After several hours of traveling, we arrived at Salonika and began negotiating

for steamship tickets. On the wall there, I saw pictures of steamships, and I got an idea of what the ship I was to take looked like. Wanting to get to America the shortest way, we bought tickets on the Austro-Hamburg-American line. We were supposed to arrive in seven days. We exchanged some of our money for five dollars worth of American money, to cover any expense we might have when we land in America. From Salonika, we traveled by train to Belgrade, Serbia; then to Vienna, Austria; then finally to the port of Bremen, Germany. It was amazing, the farther we traveled, the faster the trains seemed to go, and the cities looked better. When we reached Bremen, we were taken to a hotel near the port where our ship was docked. I could hardly sleep that night, wanting to see the real ship, not just a picture of it in a ticket office.

The next morning, we boarded the ship where only the German language was spoken. But all we had to do was mind our own business, and wait to see what was to take place. We were third class passengers and would not see much of the magnificent liner that would be our home as we crossed the Atlantic. We were to spend our time in confined quarters. To some people, that might have been the worst possible arrangement, but for us, it was the best—we had no complaints. That ship was better than anything we had seen before. We had plenty to eat, plenty of sleep, and plenty of rest—more rest than we wanted actually, because the seven day trip that the steamboat agent promised us turned out to be twenty-two days. We felt tricked, because we had paid good money for our tickets in the hope and assurance that the ship was going to go directly across the Atlantic Ocean, into New York Harbor and finally to our destination, Ellis Island, in seven days. But the boat, which was slow, jammed with people, was carrying an exorbitant amount of cargo and was nowhere near the New York Harbor after five days.

As time dragged on, I was worried sick that I might not be allowed into America. I had heard many stories of people not passing through Customs and, as a result, were sent back to their old countries. I could not bear the thought of being sent back. But, that turned out to be a needless worry, thank God! We had no trouble being admitted.

When we finally docked, I thought it strange that we had not seen the famous

Statue of Liberty, which every immigrant had come to know as a symbol of the new land. But there was so much hustle and bustle about landing, that I soon forgot about the landmark and, instead, could not wait to step ashore. It was like a dream! I felt as though I was being born again! There were many sailors and naval officers around, and I soon learned that we had landed in Annapolis, Maryland, instead of New York. I didn't understand the reason for this, but it meant that my first image of America was white-clad young Navy men, not the bronze Statue of Liberty. But nothing mattered that morning, except that, at last, I was in America. In time, I would see more of this land of opportunity.

Chapter Four

“Give me your tired, your Poor, Your huddled masses yearning to Breathe Free”... Emma Lazarus (inscribed on the Statue of Liberty 1908)

For many immigrants, the memory of their processing and entrance into the United States is very vivid. But I do not recall much of that time at all, except that each immigrant wore a tag on his or her clothing. Because I had studied some elementary English in Slimnitsa, I was able to read my tag. Some were not so fortunate and had to rely on others. The tag showed the name and address of each immigrant's contact person and destination. This made it easier for the authorities to move large groups to various locations. I was part of a group that was taken to the train depot to board a train for the Polk Street Station in Chicago. I recall that we had a short wait for the train and some of us decided to spend some of our new American money to buy some draft beer. I found it to be very bitter and to this day I never cultivated a taste for it.

After we arrived in Chicago, we took a carriage ride from the Polk Street Station to 2100 West Kinzie Street. There I lived with a group of five or six men ranging from sixteen to thirty-five years of age, who had rented a house. The son of my former Albanian boss, Mr. Doces, lived there, so he made room for me. We lived as if in a commune, each of us took his turn cooking for the entire group. As far as cleaning the house, however, no one bothered. I hate to say, but the house was always a mess and dirty. The disregard for cleanliness bothered me because even though we had been poor in Greece, my mother always made sure that our home was clean.

After I got settled I decided to look for a job, but first wanted to wash my clothes. Since I did not know the difference between the grocery store and a saloon, I went into the first store I came across, which happened to be a saloon, and asked for a bar of soap. The man handed me a bowl of soup. I knew I was in the wrong place and in embarrassment left quietly. I eventually found a store that did sell soap for washing clothes.

It was the year 1907 and I was sixteen years old, looking for a job. I was

lucky to find one, thanks to one of the fellows whom I roomed with who saw a “help wanted” sign on a building and was kind enough to take me there. I was introduced to the boss, and before he hired me, had me flex my muscles. I’m sure he was not impressed. But because I was only sixteen years of age, he hired me on the spot. For five dollars a week, I worked ten-hours a day in a molding factory, feeding strips of wood, 12 feet long and 1-1/2 inches wide into a molding machine. After two weeks on the job, I was given a raise to six dollars a week.

As the weeks went by, I realized that six dollars a week had to go a long way for me. With that amount I had to feed and clothe myself, save money to pay back what I had borrowed for the trip, and also try to send some money home to my family in Greece. I had to skimp and save, but became accustomed to hardships. After working a full day, I had to wash my clothes and prepare my meals. There was no time for fun and games or social activity. My heart ached when I would see other boys enjoying holidays with their families and loved ones. I thought how lucky they were. Some of the boys that came here from the old country forgot their parents and had themselves a good time. They were free, independent and their own bosses. They lived in nicely furnished rooms. Of course, I could have done the same, but then I would not be able to save any money. There was no way for me to be carefree, independent, and a responsible family member at the same time. My choice was for the good of the family. In spite of the circumstances I was in, I was happy because I knew that my stay in America would be short, and that I would return to Greece to live happily ever after with my family and friends. That was my goal; it made the hard work tolerable.

By always working at my best in the molding factory, the boss showed his appreciation by giving me special little jobs to perform. This did not fare well, however, with one of the boys in the factory. At work, while he was sharpening his knife, told me that it was intended for me. I could not understand what he meant, and paid no attention, until one evening when we were in the dressing room, after work, he attacked me and tried to stab me in the stomach. I kicked the knife from his hand and continued undressing. As I stooped down, he stabbed me on the back of my right leg, and the boss, hearing my screams, came to my rescue, bandaged the cut and took me home.

It took about two full weeks to recuperate from that stab wound, which caused me to lose two weeks' salary. The boy's mother and sister visited me and offered me fifteen dollars, if I would not take them to court, which I accepted.

I saw that there was no chance for making any real money at the molding factory, because it was a small factory and only employed six men. Work in a nearby quarry was available, but I knew I wasn't strong enough to handle the heavy machinery. I tried employment in a rubber factory, working on the night shift supervising 56 presses that were curing rubber. The work was so strenuous, that after two weeks, my health began to suffer and I was losing weight. My boss transferred me to another part of the factory where the work was easier, but the hours much longer. I decided to look for another job.

Finally, I landed one I really liked and have good memories of it to this day. It was with the Lomax Beverage Company of Chicago, who bottled a variety of flavors of soda. I began work there in the autumn of 1909. The factory was clean, well-lit and ventilated. I was responsible for preparing the syrup for bottling, working eight hours a day, 48 hours a week, at good pay. My starting pay was one dollar and seventy-five cents a day, or seventeen cents an hour, plus double pay for Sundays and holidays, and time-and-a-half for overtime, which I liked. I could see that there was a chance for promotion and was a happy worker. The days at work were pleasant here and seemed to go faster than at any other job I had in the past.

There were times, however, when the bottling machine would jam causing bottles to break. When this happened, I had to stop the machine and remove the broken glass, tossing them on the floor. I would be so irritated that I would cuss like the other men I used to hear in similar circumstances. One day, two workers, who happened to be Sunday school teachers, came to me and wondered why I used such filthy language. They said that it was completely out of character for me. I told them that I wasn't aware of how bad the words were. They said that if I did not use these words for two Saturdays in a row, I would never use them again. I took their advice, and those words were never again spoken in my lifetime.

The machine used at the Lomax Bottling Company was the beginning of automation in the bottling industry and operated at a very fast pace. At all times you had to be alert, because the full bottles of soda had to be replaced manually. For our protection we were told to use face masks, but they were cumbersome and it was too time-consuming to put them on. One afternoon, as I was bottling ginger ale, a bottle exploded and while I was shielding my face with my hand, the broken glass cut my wrist quite seriously. The foreman was prompt to apply pressure to stop the bleeding, and I was taken to the doctor, where I was given a shot of whiskey to numb the pain while he stitched the cut.

But, all in all, I was content to be working at the bottling plant. It wasn't long before I became the highest paid employee in the factory. Of course, that was due to ability, not bribery. To keep a job through ability in a place where you have straw bosses was not easy. The owner sees and appreciates a good worker, but the straw boss likes the smooth talker. The high pay was important to me because that was the reason for my coming to America. I planned to spend the rest of my life in Greece, and wanted to become an independent merchant (probably of a candy store), marry a Greek girl, and raise a family.

I was never afraid of the foreman or the boss at work, because I knew what was required of me and always did my best. My fellow workers knew that I would never cheat or bribe anyone. I was doing fine. I now made as much as forty-two dollars and sixty cents a week, working a great deal of overtime, Sundays and holidays. That was considered a very high pay in 1911, and I built quite a reputation, highly respected and liked by my peers, which made me feel good.

I was attracted to American girls. I liked the way they dressed, the way they wore their hair, and I enjoyed their warm and spirited personality. I felt comfortable with them, their customs, and their ways. However, I could not in good conscience give in and show my love because my intention was to marry a Greek girl. One time, I fell so madly in love that I was in agony for four months. I never want to live that period of my life over again. She was always on my mind, and it was a long time before I could return to normal

thinking. You see, I could not become serious with an American girl. I had to be honest with her, for I was to marry a Greek girl after I returned home. I held on to my promise even though I suffered long and hard for it.

The old country is where I would marry, and it was a custom there that the women would look up to their husband. But, yet, I knew that women are able to win men over, and have a great deal to do with man's success, because they can be an inspiration to him. I recall the expression "Behind every great man is a woman."

So after I had lived in America for two years, working and saving money, I began to think that it would be nice if my older brother, Nick, could join me in America. In this way, I would have a member of my family with me, and we, together, could make and save more money, return to Greece, and start a business of our own.

In the meantime, my brother Nick, who was in Slimnitsa, married our next door neighbor, Kirana. I remember Kirana as a young girl of about ten years of age, dancing out in the yard in the rain singing, "The rain in May will make my hair on my head grow longer and prettier." We thought she was so cute. So, when I learned that my brother got married, I was particularly happy because his wife, as was the custom, would help my mother with the housework and the raising of the children. My mother had no daughters old enough to help her. You see, the custom in the old country was that when a man would marry, his wife would live with him and his parents. The wife would take her orders from her mother-in-law and the son from his father. Actually, the old folks were the rulers of the house.

My brother Nick's marriage, however, did not change my plans to have him come to America. It would only be for a short time, making and saving money to return to Greece. I sent my brother the money for his trip and I began preparing for his arrival. Of course, I was worried about how he was going to get here and whether he would be rejected at Ellis Island. We worry about things that never happen.

I should have left the matter in God's hands, for Nick had no trouble—his

journey across the Atlantic Ocean to New York Harbor in America took only seven days. I took a train to the Chicago depot on Polk Street to meet him. We were so happy to see each other. We embraced and held onto each other for a long time. We talked continually about the family and our friends. It was so good to be with my brother. Nick lived with me in the home that we rented; we would always make room for one more person! My friends visited us and it was truly a happy occasion—like a family reunion. We took him sightseeing, and he could not believe all that he saw, especially the tall buildings. “There is no end to America”, he would say.

As days went by, he learned a few words and expressions in English. He washed and ironed his own clothes and always looked neat. The next important thing was to get him a job where I worked, which I did. He didn’t make as much money as I, but he was working, and I was satisfied. We worked and saved together. We were brothers in everything, in the good and bad, in the losses and gains. I would take my pay envelope and give it to Nick, because he was the oldest. That was our custom. It did not make any difference that I was more capable than him. But, at the same time, I would watch very carefully and guide him. We would discuss our spending and promise each other that none of our pay would be spent foolishly. Whenever he decided to do something, he would not do it unless he spoke to me about it. We also agreed on the amount of money to send home.

I was younger, but somehow had better luck in landing a better-paying job. And he, in turn, understood and appreciated my ability. So my brother and I lived on a daily basis, struggling to get some place in this world, to live with dignity. It definitely was hard being thousands of miles from home and loved ones, and at times we would feel discouraged and lose hope. But, I would simply try to think that we are here for a short time and we must try to do our best. I would turn to God, to Jesus Christ, and receive the courage to keep myself together. Being the poorest of all, I thought that I was the richest of all.

Why and how were Nick and I more efficient and able to save more money than many of the people who were born in America? Because we had our minds made up that we were here as strangers, for a while only, and we made

it our business to stay home. When a person is confined to stay home, naturally he must find something to do. We washed our clothes, prepared our lunches, and had everything set for work the next morning. On Sundays and holidays when we had plenty of time, we would sit down and write a letter to our parents, so we could make them happy. I remember that when I would mail a letter to our parents, I would always examine it carefully to be sure that the envelope was sealed properly. With pride and satisfaction, I would put it in the mail box and rejoice in my heart for fulfilling my duty. When a person makes up his mind to save, that makes him more efficient. One thing I remember that gives me a lot of satisfaction is that I did not blame my father for the fact that we did not have enough of the necessities of life. I know that he was more than willing to give us the things we needed, but it was impossible for him. He did the best he could. Now I can understand, and I feel sorry for him because of how he must have felt when he could not give us the things we needed. I know now, because I have my own children.

Now, back to my autobiography...

Things went along reasonably well for Nick and me for some time, until he developed an enlarged gland on the right side of his neck, under the chin, and it worried him terribly. He was totally preoccupied with the swelling. I knew something had to be done, so I took him to a doctor who said the swelling was caused by a tumor and that it had to be removed. This was in the spring of 1910, and Nick was taken to the German American Hospital on Diversey Boulevard in Chicago. He spent two weeks recuperating after his surgery.

Before he was able to go back to work, I was successful in getting him the same kind of high paying work that I had. But after a very short time, he was not able to handle the difficult, complex machine and the straw boss complained to me about Nick's slowness. Even though Nick was not so fast and clever, he was thorough in what he did. He was a quiet and peaceful man.

The foreman liked him and gave him an all-around job, at one-third the money I brought home, but I did not mind. After all, we pooled our money together for the purpose of sending money home to help mother and father. I could tell them that Nick and I were doing fine and how we were progressing

with our plans to become rich and return home. For over a year after Nick's operation, I continued to write home to tell them that Nick and I are fulfilling our dream.

It was not long when we received a letter from home that my mother was very ill. About six months later, we received an envelope with the borders painted black, which indicated someone at home had died. I never expected the news to be of my mother's death. Although some letters from my family had mentioned that Mother was ill; from what they said, I had never imagined that she was near death. I just cannot tell you in words how I felt. It was like I died also. I no longer cared about anything. I was working so hard to be able to return to my mother and make her life happy. She was only forty years old when she passed away, with the same words on her lips, repeating over and over, "Michael, I won't see you again." This was told to me by my cousin, Nick Pittatsis, who was there when my mother was near death. I never felt like myself anymore. I could not keep my word about returning to see her. It was not meant to be.

I also felt bad for my younger brothers and sisters. I knew they felt the shock of her death worse than I, being right there close to her, and would miss her very much. I thought I had better decide soon to go back home so I could be of help to them that were left behind. So, a few months later, in July of 1912, my brother and I left for the old country. I knew Nick's wife would be anxiously awaiting to see her husband. After paying all expenses and purchasing clothes and presents for our relatives, we had twelve hundred dollars left to give to our father. When we arrived home, we were greeted with love and kisses. Since Nick was older, he presented our father the money we had worked and saved for this happy occasion.

Well, beloved sons, seeing conditions as they are today, I have nothing more to offer you but my practical experience, from the time I left home when I was a boy, up to the time I returned home from America. Thoughts that kept me inspired to endure all the hardships were thoughts pinned upon the good things, how I was going home, have a business of my own, get married, raise a family and give my family the things I liked to have, but never had. I am going to try and tell you boys how I fought my difficulties. The very first

thing, the most valuable weapon, or the first line of defense, was a background of God. I don't believe that there was a day, or hour, or time throughout my life that I did not think of Jesus, and the Apostles, and the Church. You've heard the expression "Mother knows best". Well, I would say "God knows best."

Chapter Five

The Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him”... Genesis 2-18

I was going home with the intention of staying and making a living in Greece. It wasn't exactly the way I planned, because my mother was no longer alive and, therefore, she was not able to share in my success and happiness. But I had accomplished what I set out to do in America. I worked hard, sacrificed much, and lived for the day when I'd return to my native country to rejoin my family, relatives and friends. I was twenty-one years old, and ready to take on the world. I felt full of pep, carefree, and full of ambition. I experienced so much warmth that I felt even the mountains, hills and valleys that I knew as a little boy would recognize me, and be happy for me. My cup was definitely overflowing. It was a wonderful homecoming. I think everyone in Slimnitsa and the surrounding villages were present to welcome Nick and me, the boys from America. The celebration was fit for a king. For days, we were treated like celebrities, and spent most of our time answering eager questions about our life and adventure in America.

Soon, however, the curiosity and celebration ended, and we settled down in my father's house with all my brothers and sisters, Nick's wife and his child. I experienced family living again, with its joys, fun, sharing, and caring. I had really missed that aspect of life during my five-year stay in America, when I was truly lonesome for my family. Now I was home again and eager to help in any way I could.

Alexandra, my little sister, who was about two years old, wasn't walking, or even attempting to walk. Nor was she interested in playing, always quiet. I noticed that she was always wet. With a little ingenuity, I made a chair like a toilet seat, and with the help of my sister-in-law Alexandra was “potty” trained. This made a complete change in her personality. It wasn't long before she began to crawl, walk and be as cute as can be.

My father was always busy doing something, and watching him set traps looked interesting. So I decided to try my luck at it. Not only did my father

get a thrill of catching a fox, but the fur was another means of making money. On one occasion, my father brought home a fox he had caught with his trap, put the animal in his room, to deal with it later. My father did not realize, however, that the fox was only maimed, and when he returned to the room later, found the fox had made its escape through an open window. My father was so disappointed and said, “why didn’t I shut that window?” My experience with traps was no better. Late one evening, I took some bait and set a trap near the river. The next morning, I couldn’t wait to see if I had a catch. To my surprise, there was no fox, and neither was there a trap. I looked all around, and all that day I wondered what happened to the trap.

That evening, while we were having our supper, our next door neighbor paid us a visit. He was quite annoyed and angry, because his dog had gotten caught in the trap I’d set, and dragged it home with him. His leg was bruised, cut and sore. We felt sorry for the dog and our neighbor, for the dog was in such pain, that it was hardly able to move.

I used to enjoy the beautiful countryside near our home, and would spend time admiring the many different trees. There I would find pear, plum, oak, birch, pine and walnut trees, but nowhere could I find a chestnut tree. I decided that there should also be a chestnut tree, and was glad that I was able to get a chestnut from the traveling peddler, who visited our village every week. I planted the chestnut in a field not too far from the homestead that my father owned. It was located on a gentle hill, which overlooked a little green valley. I would dream of building a home there at some future time, when I would marry and have children of my own. The chestnut tree was to serve as a landmark for me. My grandmother would tell me stories of money and treasure being buried on that particular hillside. I entertained the thought that maybe one day I would dig and find some riches and live like a king. The chestnut tree received a great deal of care during my time at home, and I was sure that when it had grown to a good height, it would cast a lovely shade upon my future home.

But along with all the pleasures of village life and my return, there was also quite a bit of tension and strife in the lives of the villagers, for the Balkan War was at its height. When I left Greece in 1907, Christians and Jews were

not drafted in the Turkish army. Now in 1912, to my surprise, the Turks changed their conscription laws, and drafted all young men despite their religious affiliation. So, when I went to Salonika to report my arrival in Greece to the authorities, as was the custom, the official there took my name and address. I knew what that meant; they would soon be looking to draft me in the Turkish army. But I did not want that. I was a Christian and did not want to fight against the Christians.

Since I did not want to be drafted into the Turkish army, I stayed away from home for a while and joined a company called Andartes. This was a group of men, who joined together to protect their Greek villages and their people from the attacks of the Turks. I armed myself and tried to be cautious at all times.

As I look back, I must have been quite bold, because I made a Greek flag and paraded it through Turkish occupied villages on my way to Bilisht. My friends and I were not stopped, nor threatened by the Turks, however, because a Greek regiment was nearby. As members of the Andartes, we went to the village of Arza to collect arms and ammunition, and stayed overnight in an Albanian house. The women there were afraid of us, but I assured them that no harm would come to them. I was able to communicate with them in their own language, for I had learned the language while working for the Albanian owner of the general store. The fact that I could speak to them in their language was a relief to the women, and after we were there a few hours, they cooked us a wonderful dinner.

The next morning, all of the guns and rifles that we had obtained were placed in the center of the floor. I was carrying a Turkish gun known as a Martina (old style), but I spotted a German-made gun (Mauser) that I liked, and exchanged my gun for the more sophisticated one. I had plenty of ammunition for this new gun, as a result of several skirmishes between the Greeks and Turks in the villages. When the Turks retreated, many arms and shells were left behind and the Andartes salvaged whatever was usable. After we completed our work of collecting guns in that small village, the members of this particular group of Andartes disbanded. Most of the men, including me, joined the Greek army; others continued as vigilantes. The Greek army

gave its recruits a ten day probation period. After that time, the men had to decide whether to stay in the army or not. I decided to leave and had to sign release papers. I knew that I had no business being a soldier—that was the extent of my army career. Anyway, I was planning to return to America. Years later, my brother Nick joined the Greek army to continue fighting the Turks.



In the meantime, the matchmaker of the village, Mita Popova, wanted me to meet a sixteen-year old girl, who lived in a nearby village, called Monapilon. I was invited to a wedding where I was to be formally introduced to her. Her name was Thomai Farsalas, who was to later become my wife. She would be there with a group of her friends. During the festivities, the matchmaker sent Thomai for water, and I was able to get a good look at her. She was a lovely young girl, with a beautiful figure, of average weight and height, lightly complexioned, with wavy sandy hair and hazel eyes. She appeared shy, but likeable and pleasant. Her inner beauty radiated from her eyes. When I laid eyes on her, I had a deep feeling that we were meant for each other. I guess you might say that it was love at first sight. Little did I know that this love would grow and flourish for sixty-eight beautiful years.

Getting back to this time when I was twenty-one, I felt that I wanted to know her better. We started courting immediately. Our engagement date was decided upon by the two fathers and the husband-to-be. As was the custom in those days, the young man would take the members of his family to the future bride's home and visit with her family. It was a practice, also, for the father of the bride to give his future son-in-law a dowry. I received 15 pounds because this is what the husband of the older daughter received, and I'm sure Thomai's father wanted to show no partiality. So, after the evening meal, I turned to Thomai and actually proposed. In a very low whisper, she shyly gave her consent. So, at sixteen, Thomai became my intended wife. Our engagement was approved by the family. I courted Thomai regularly from September to December, 1912.

That period of time wasn't always easy. I remember one time, when my father and I visited Thomai and her family, our fathers got deep into conversation and none of them watched the time. Before we realized, it was too late for my father and me to return to our village. Naturally, we were invited to stay overnight. In this home, one huge room with a fireplace served as the kitchen, living room, and bedroom. That night, the two fathers slept on one side of the fireplace, and directly across from them, were Thomai's mother, Thomai and I. It wasn't a comfortable situation to be in, and I could not wait for the morning, as I am sure Thomai felt the same way. Our

upbringing and morals did not allow us to be free with our emotions until we were married.



My beautiful wife, Thomai and me.

Like any engaged couple, we could hardly wait for our wedding, which was set for December 26, 1912. I counted the days, and marked each one off on my homemade calendar. We could not get married before Christmas, because it was the Advent season, a four week period set aside by the Church to celebrate the birth of the Christ Child. Weddings and all forms of celebrations were not permitted. So, it was the day after Christmas when Thomai and I became husband and wife.

Thomai and I made our home with my father. He now had two daughters-in-law living in his home—my wife, Thomai, and my brother Nick's wife, Kirana. There was no such thing as a honeymoon in those days. Married couples simply went to the house they would live in as husband and wife. There was a custom, though, that was strictly upheld on the wedding night. It was traditional that a woman was not to be touched before her marriage. The woman was to be pure; her virginity to remain until the wedding night. This was a special gift she gave to her husband. So, the morning after the first night of marriage, some villagers paid the family a visit. Without going into any details, proof was established of my wife's virginity to their satisfaction. It was the custom and expected, so the bride was not embarrassed, but proud of being a virgin. The happy occasion was then celebrated with a delicious dinner and plenty to drink. The atmosphere was warm, tender and joyful.

Now that I was married, I had to find a way to earn a living for my wife and me. I had an idea of making candy, and with my brother-in-law, opened a candy shop in Bilisht. Once again I was 25 miles away from home, away from my wife, because, naturally, we had to live in Bilisht. With no transportation available, we had to walk seven hours to get home, which only permitted me to go home about every two weeks.

This business venture proved to be a big headache. It was my first experience with a partner, who depended on me totally. I wasn't really knowledgeable nor experienced enough to operate a full scale candy-making business. Sure, I had some capital, but I was definitely worried about the actual making of the candy, like the amount of ingredients necessary to produce the best results.

One day, sitting in a nearby village coffee shop, thinking about my business predicament, I must have looked worried, because a man sitting alongside, asked me what was wrong. As we were talking, I told him of my business deal and my deep-seated fear of operating a candy shop. It turned out that he was in the same type of candy-making business. We became instant friends—he spent days with me, explaining every detail of the business. He taught me many things that my old boss wasn't even aware of, and I was very grateful to him. It was definitely a chance meeting, that was like a miracle.

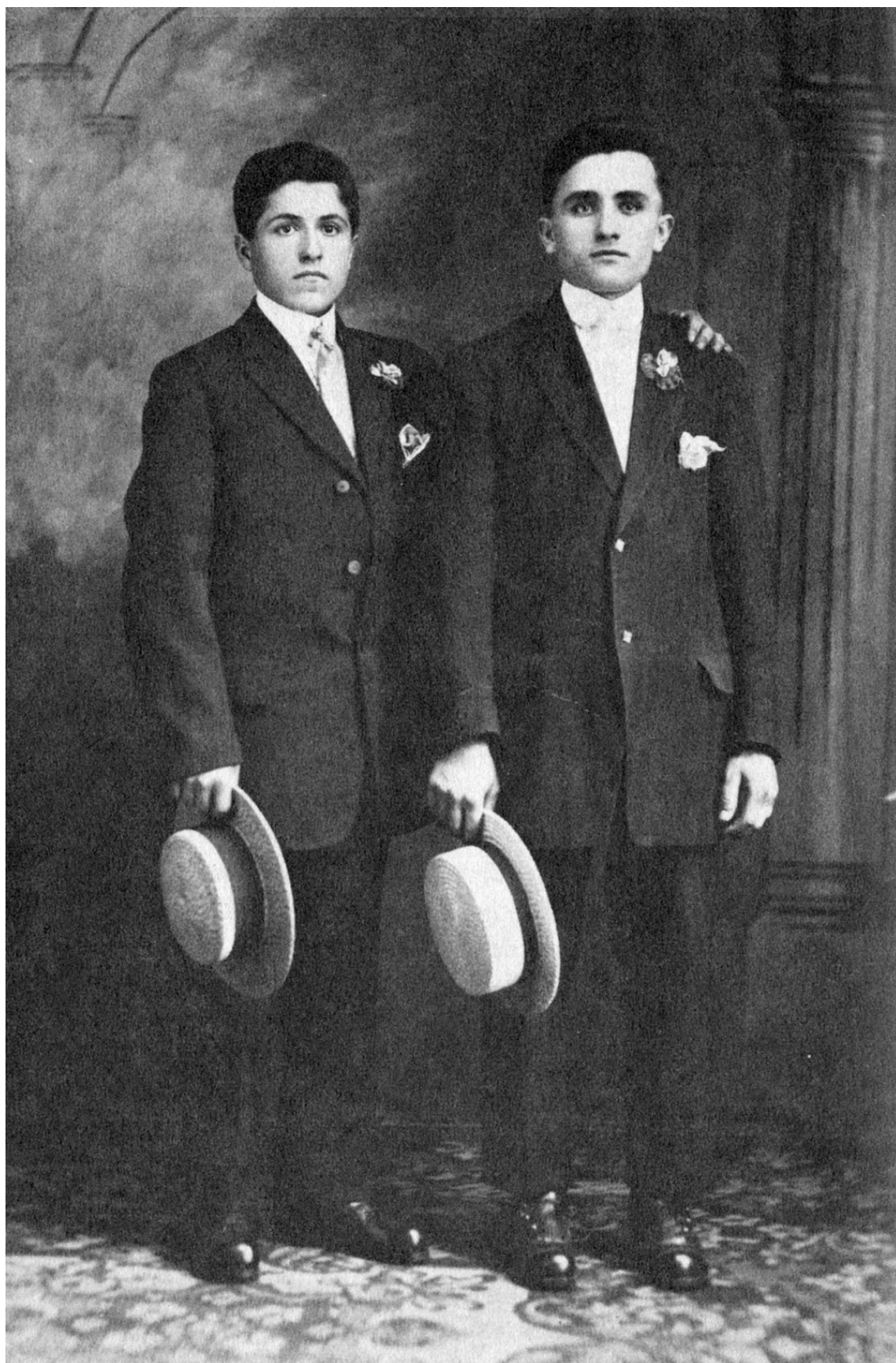
But as months passed by, I became very lonesome for my wife, and disillusioned with the candy shop. Because the shop was so far away, I could only return home from time to time. I just couldn't imagine making a worthwhile future in Bilisht. My mind kept returning to America. True, Greece was my home, the place of my birth. My heart was there, but I wanted more. Therefore, I let my head, not my heart rule. I knew I would have to work two months in Greece for the same pay that required only two weeks work in America. I could not see working so hard and so long, and get paid so little in return. It was definitely better in America. So, I started to consider settling there, with the idea of building a home near my own shop. It was a dream I knew could materialize. My candy shop partner, my brother-in-law, was anxious to buy me out, so that made it easier for me. I sold my share to him, and I understand he remained satisfied with the business until the day he died.

Although it was easy to decide to return to America, it was not so easy to ask my father to allow Thomai to accompany me. I assumed that he would naturally want to send her with me, but that was not so. He felt that Thomai should remain in Greece with him, otherwise, he felt I wouldn't have an incentive to return to Greece... and furthermore, my father thought that I would discontinue the financial help from America if Thomai came with me. That, of course, would not have happened, but my father was insecure and didn't want to risk the loss. I was upset and hurt, but I felt that it was my duty as a son to obey him—matter of honor. I did not have nerve enough to insist that my wife come with me. Once again, I had to sacrifice.

My father argued that I had the perfect right to stay home with my wife, but to allow my two brothers, Nick and Spiro, to go to America. But, I knew that I was more capable of succeeding in America than my brother Nick, because of our past experience the first time we were there.

Even though I'd be making money, I knew what was in store for me. After all, this would be a repeat performance. I was going to America to work, and work only; to save every penny that I earned, and to do without marital joys—all at the age of twenty-two. I would truly have to live the Christian life, upholding chastity of mind and body. I was sure that it was also going to be extremely difficult for Thomai. I remember that the night before I left for America, she cried and cried. After all, she was very fond of me, and we never really had the opportunity to be together for any period of time. Who knows what was going on in her mind? She knew that there were Greek men from the village who went to America and never returned to be reunited with their families. She definitely must have had her fears and anxieties. She kept all of these things to herself.

In October of 1913, my younger brother Spiro and I started back for the United States of America, leaving my wife behind. There was a fellow from the same village, Christ Pishos, who accompanied us. He was returning to America, also leaving his newly-wed wife in Greece. So, the two women certainly had something in common. Our neighbor, Sam Toulos, making the trip for the first time, was the fourth member of our group.



My brother Spiro and me.



Statue of Liberty

We traveled third class on a Greek ship. The journey across the ocean took about fourteen days, a much shorter time than my earlier trip. I recognized the Statue of Liberty in the New York Harbor, and a sense of pride came over me. I must admit that I was extremely happy to see land, because this was a most uncomfortable trip. This ship traveled at such a fast speed that I was seasick most of the time. After spending the night in New York City, we took a train to Chicago.

We spent the night in an inexpensive hotel in New York City, as did many of the passengers from our ship. These were people of different nationalities. A most tragic accident took place that night with some young Albanian men who roomed across the hall from us. The rooms were lit with gas lamps that

hung from the ceiling. They had to be lit with a match and extinguished by turning a knob on the side of the lamp. In this manner the flow of gas would be stopped when not in use. I explained this simple procedure to the Albanian men in their own language because I spoke Albanian and this was their first trip to America. But that night, before the young men retired for bed, one of them simply blew out the flame. The flow of gas continued throughout the night and asphyxiated the men. In the morning, we were shocked when we learned of the tragedy.

Chapter Six

After a long separation, my wife, Thomai, comes to America.

The morning after this terrible tragedy, I, along with Spiro, Christ Pishos and Sam Toulos, arrived in Chicago by train. We lived at 1912 Austin Avenue among friends I knew from my first trip. I spent time with my brother Spiro to acquaint him with life in America. A few days thereafter, I went to my former place of employment, the Lomax Bottling Company, and talked to Fred, the foreman, telling him that I was looking for a job. Fred ignored me so I went home, but did not give up the idea of getting my old job back again.

The next morning I returned to the factory, but this time to see Frank, the boss, who was glad to see me. He asked me what I planned to do. I told him that I was looking for a job, that I was there yesterday and talked to Fred, but he ignored me. Frank became angry and called him over and told him to put me to work immediately. My boss said that he was happy to see me in America again.

On my first day of work, and as I walked through the factory talking with some of the men I recognized, I noticed the machine that I was to operate was standing idle. One of the men told me that no one wanted to run the machine, because it was very complex, moved too fast and had to be adjusted several times during its operation. What he said was true. I knew that particular machine had a three-headed apparatus that bottled all flavors of soda at a very rapid speed. I went home that day, surprised, but in a sense somewhat proud of the fact that no one was able to operate it.

I was once again successful and making money, but as time went by, I became extremely lonesome for my wife. It was really difficult being separated from her. No matter where I was or what I was doing, whether at a picture show or at work, my wife was constantly on my mind. I missed her so much that I had to send for her, but I would have to be in a better financial position to do this.

Because I went to evening classes during my first visit to America, I learned something of the English language and was able to read. A new chapter in my life began as the result of an ad I saw in the Chicago Tribune. It read that for forty-five dollars one could learn to be a licensed barber and receive his own tools. I liked the idea because this would give me the opportunity to become the boss of my own business. My life now consisted of working in the bottling company during the day and attending barber classes at night at the New Method Barber College, at 612 W. Madison Street. I attended barber college for four months and after that I started to work in a barber shop on Saturdays and Sundays on a percentage basis. The barber shop was located on Grand and Lincoln Avenues in Chicago. Looking back, haircuts at that time were twenty-five cents and shaves fifteen cents. This gave me a chance to occupy myself most of the time and increase my earning power. I worked and dreamt of the day when my wife would join me.

Now that I was barbering, the job at the bottling company began to present a problem for me. Just like my first time in America, this machine would jam and bottles would break and occasionally would cut me to the extent that I could not barber. Yet, I did not want to quit my job with the bottling company because it was a better paying job. Quite a few times I discussed this with the boss of the barber shop, but I could not get any encouragement from him. He said that with the factory job I received a weekly paycheck, but there was no guaranty of what I could make as a barber. Although I agreed with his reasoning, it was still a job under somebody's command. So I kept watching for an opportunity to buy myself a shop.

With my spare time I looked for a barber shop in a growing community where I could settle down and raise a family. Between November, 1913 and December, 1914, I had saved about seven hundred dollars, which was sufficient for a down payment on a business. The rest of my earned money was sent home to my father and the family. I would have felt guilty if I hadn't sent money home. I strongly felt that it was my responsibility to do so. After all, I did make a promise which I was going to live up to.

Inquiring around, I was told that the town of Argo, which Was near Chicago, would be a good place for me to start. I decided to settle there. This was in

December, 1914. I learned that a Mr. O'Brien, who owned a news stand and barber shop there, was willing to sell the barber shop which was doing a good business. We agreed on a price of four hundred fifty dollars for the business. I did not believe in buying anything on time, nor in purchasing more than I was able to pay for. As I did not have the experience, I was afraid of investing all of my own money, and I thought going into a partnership with someone would be a good idea. I asked a young man whom I became acquainted with while attending barber college if he would become partners with me. He was an Albanian named John Azimis. I reasoned that if there was sufficient work, my partner, John, and I would operate the shop together. If not, John would work in Chicago where he had a decent paying job, and I would work in the barber shop alone. With that understanding, John and I paid two hundred dollars on the barber shop and agreed to pay the balance of two hundred and fifty dollars later. The shop, located at 6258 Archer Avenue in Argo, became ours and I was the sole manager.

Now there was a barber working in this shop with the owner Mr. O'Brien by the name of Ed Pysbinsky, and when we bought the shop I asked Mr. O'Brien whether he was going to stay on. If he didn't, I would have kept the barber. But he decided to stay, saying he had a personal interest in the shop because John and I still owed him two-hundred-and-fifty dollars. So, I had no choice but to leave Ed go and he went to Summit and opened up his own shop, which did not hurt me because it was quite a distance from my place of business.

It wasn't more than a month when he was persuaded by his friends to come to Argo and that made real competition for me. I was only a "green" barber and a stranger, whereas this other fellow was a native and an old-time barber. Each morning, he would go out of his way to walk past my shop on his way to his own shop. As he passed, he would laugh at the few customers I had and would occasionally look into the shop with a grin, which made me so angry that one day I called out to him, "I will be around here, doing business, long after You are gone." It was known that Ed tried to make extra money on the side through the manufacture and sale of "moonshine". Whatever caused it I cannot say, but his business suffered and John's and mine, in turn, prospered. But in spite of the prosperity, John was dissatisfied. He complained that I was taking advantage of the partnership by sleeping in the barbershop and not

paying any rent. I knew something had to be done before the situation got out of hand. I thought it best to dissolve my partnership one way or the other, so I gave John an option. Either I would take ten dollars less from my share and he would keep the shop, or I'd give him ten dollars more and I would become sole owner of the shop. But I was prepared that if John decided to keep the shop, I knew I could get my old job back at the Lomax Company, working eight hours a day. Yet, although the barber hours were from eight o'clock in the morning until nine o'clock in the evening, and paid one-third as much, I still liked the idea of being my own boss. I was happy when John decided to let me have the shop. Again, I did not mind the work at the bottling company, but I liked being the owner and boss of my own business.

My business was not doing well at all and I was worried. Mr. O'Brien was anxious to leave and said if I would pay off the balance due on our contract, he would give me the news stand, which sold all of the Chicago papers: The Chicago Tribune, The Daily News, The Chicago American and The Herald Examiner. I felt this was an offer I could not afford to turn down. I then became the sole proprietor of a barber shop and a newsstand. I settled down to business and hard work. My day began at 5:30 in the morning—papers and barbershop—all day long. The entire day, and many times into the evenings, the barber shop was open for business. By 9:00 at night, I was dead-tired and sometimes almost fell asleep while shaving the last customer. Many days I'd go without supper because I was so busy and the restaurants closed before my barber shop did. I would stay hungry many times but satisfied that I was busy making money, living right in the barber shop, and making plans on bringing my wife to America. Gradually, I realized that I would have to learn how to cook some simple meals for myself. My method was trial and error. Once I put together a mixture of beans, chopped onions, and olive oil and put it in a pot, only to fall asleep with nothing left in the pot worthwhile to eat. I eventually learned to cook however, and for months I lived and worked in this manner. I saved most of the money I made.

I recall about this time (year 1915) that I did not take advantage of the opportunity of purchasing the building in which my barber shop and news stand were located. But at that time, I thought otherwise. I still had the intention of returning to Greece and didn't want to make any commitments. I thought the asking price of eight thousand dollars for the building was too

high, since my income was only fifty dollars a month, and I was paying twenty-five dollars a month rent. Also the store next to my shop was vacant, and I would not be collecting rent from that space. My landlord, Mr. Knoedler, tried his best to convince me that it was a good investment, but I was too afraid to commit myself. Owning a building meant paying taxes, fire insurance premiums, heating bills, repairs, etc, also, I still had the idea of going back to Greece after the war to make investments there. Well, Mr. Knoedler's predictions came true. It didn't take long before the property was sold to someone else; my rent increased by five dollars a month and gradually to twenty-five dollars more, and finally, I was paying one hundred dollars a month for rent. So, I would have been in good financial shape had I taken Mr. Knoedler's advice and bought the building. Instead, I placed my money in a safe, reliable bank, The First National Bank of Chicago.

It was not long before I had accumulated a sufficient amount of money to seriously consider sending for my young wife, Thomai. That was my ultimate goal in life! It was a difficult task for me to write to my father asking him to send her. I wished that he would have done that voluntarily, but this was not to be. Even though my father had a perfect opportunity to send Thomai to America he did not. I learned that some friends of our family were about to make the trip to America, and since they were from our village, I thought that my father would send Thomai with them. I knew I didn't have enough time to send my father the money for Thomai's fare, so I sent him a telegram. I urged him to borrow the money and send my wife, and that I would reimburse him the two hundred dollars as soon as possible. I thought for sure she would be among the Greek people Who were making the journey. When I found out the date of their arrival, I went to the depot and when the train finally arrived, my wife Was not among them. It took me two years to convince my father to send her to me. I wrote him of my disappointment, enclosed a cashier's check for two hundred dollars, and emphatically insisted that he send her. He answered my letter with a reprimand. "Michael", he wrote, "You are making a grave mistake. Not only have I lost my son, but I am about to lose my daughter-in-law to America." Perhaps he thought that I would forget about him and the village life in Greece. I'm sure he also felt that if Thomai was in America with me, I would discontinue sending a monthly check to him. But, his very last happy sentence read, "Yes, I'm sending your wife to you."

Now that Thomai was finally coming, I worried about how she would look because the people in the old country wore odd clothes and I knew I would be embarrassed if she dressed like one of them. I hoped and prayed that someone would be wise and prepare my wife for this country with decent-looking clothes. Yet, even as I hoped that, I realized that I loved her so much that I would be happy just to see her.

Finally, in 1916, she set sail for America. Unfortunately it was during the German submarine blockade of World War I and my wife had to spend two months in Athens, Greece, waiting for a ship to take her to America. During her stay in Athens, she took sick with a severe sore throat, probably diphtheria, and she never felt like herself again. When she arrived in Chicago, I realized how sick she must have been, because she did not have her usual rosy complexion, but was pale and thin. Yet, I recognized her immediately in the midst of the huddled mass of displaced persons. I was so happy to see her... I embraced her and held her close to me.

It was now time to begin our life together. We took a taxi to the barber shop and I remember that she took off her babushka and exposed her beautiful long wavy hair. She was quiet most of the way home... I held her close, our eyes met. It was just so wonderful to be together again.



Barber shop

We arrived at the barber shop and were greeted by my brother Spiro, who was helping me at the time. I took her to the back of the barber shop which was to be our home. She noticed the stove and asked what it was. This was a new experience for her. I told her that is where she would cook our meals and I would show her how to use it.

My wife, Thomai, made history when she arrived in Argo. She was the first woman from a Greek community to join her husband in Argo; all of the other men's wives were still in Greece. She was to experience quite a bit of loneliness her first few months here. She did not know a soul, and even if she had, she wouldn't have been able to communicate because she didn't know the English language. However, I did introduce her to an Albanian woman in town, and although Thomai could not speak Albanian, I was able to translate for them. It didn't take long for my wife to learn enough of the language to

communicate with her. As time went by, they became friends and my wife became more relaxed. They would discuss and share household ideas. Thomai learned from her what types of pans were used for making pita, bread and how to bake it in an indoor oven. This was new for Thomai, because in Greece, they baked the pita and bread in an outdoor oven.

After such a long separation, Thomai and I wanted to spend as much time together as possible. I cut an opening in the wall of the barbershop between my work area and living quarters. In that way, Thomai was able to watch me at work and we could be together. Every time I had a few moments, I would go back to the rear of the shop and join her for coffee. Actually, the hole in the wall proved to be a help to both of us. In due time, Thomai saw how busy I was, so she tried to help me with some of my workload. She would get up very early in the morning to sell newspapers to the customers. She was really friendly and congenial and the customers liked her, but she had a difficult time giving the correct change. The customers were pretty honest, though. On one occasion, I remember Thomai became somewhat confused. After she gave a customer his change, he continued pointing to the money in his hand. She immediately turned to me, and said, "Michael, what's wrong with him? I gave him his change." As it turned out, Thomai had undercharged him, and all the customer wanted to do was to return the extra change she had given him.

I loved to surprise her. Many times I'd go shopping, especially for her. I knew that she needed so many things, especially clothes, and I had no trouble buying her clothes. I would approach a saleslady who was about the same height and weight as Thomai, and ask her to try them on. That way, I was able to buy her a coat, dresses, hats and pocketbooks that fit and were appropriate. She loved surprises and always rewarded me with a kiss.

I was extremely happy that year. Besides having my wife with me, my brother Nick was about to make his second trip to America. His intention was to come here again for about two years, make some money and return home to his family. By now, he was a happily married man and the father of three children. Thomai and I were expecting our first!

Chapter Seven

...and God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply”... Gen. 1:28

Thomai and I lived in the back of the barber shop for about four months and then moved to a third floor apartment on 61st Place in Argo. My brother Nick also lived with us during his second stay in America. It was in that flat that our first child, Peter, was born... on July 31, 1917. Although we lived near a hospital, Thomai refused to have the baby there. When the time came for her delivery, she was all prepared with scissors, needle and thread. I left to inform the doctor that it was very close to her delivery. When I returned with the doctor, much to his surprise, she had already given birth. The doctor then took over.

The baby was named Peter, not Michael after me, because of an old Greek custom of choosing a baby's name. When a child was born to the parents, the sole responsibility of naming her or him was left to the godparents. As a result, the parents would not know the name of their infant until the day of the christening, which took place two weeks after the birth of the child. It was also the custom that the mother of the baby did not attend the christening, but waited at home. During the religious service, the baby would be immersed in water three times, in honor of the Blessed Trinity. After the baby was anointed with holy oil, the godfather was asked to announce the baby's name, which was spoken for all present to hear. This would be the first time that the father became aware of his child's name.

After the ceremony, friends would hold a feast for the family of the newly-baptized child, and after the baptism, children present at the ceremony would race to the parents' home. The first child to arrive and announce the name of the baby would receive a coin. Mother and friends, anxiously waiting, were preparing a dinner for the occasion. This was a practice we also continued with our family in America.

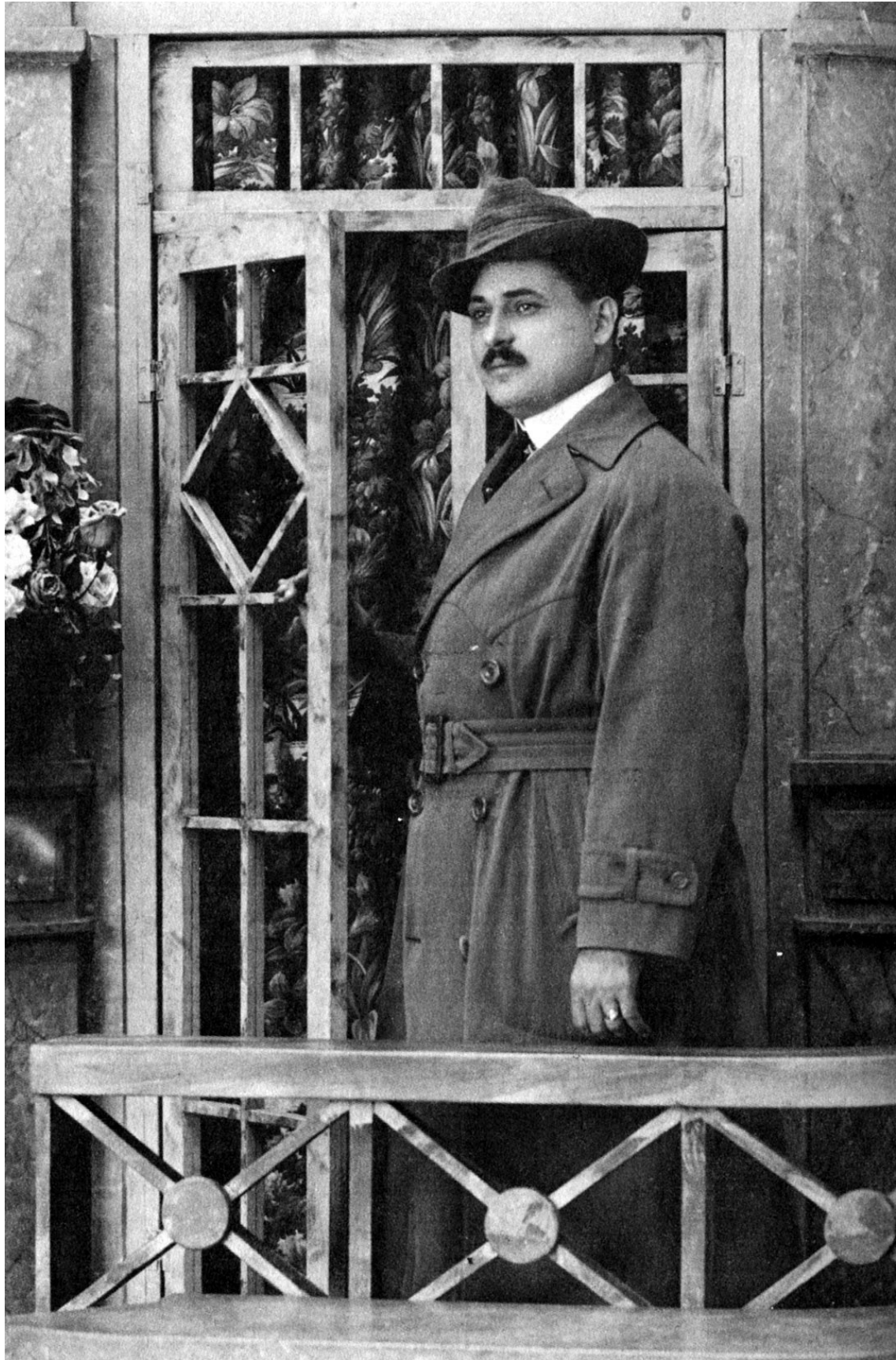
My first born, Peter, was named after a very good friend of mine, Pete Kokinos, whom everyone called Pete Kelley. He was a big, husky man—

tough- on the outside, soft and gentle on the inside. Throughout his years in America, he proved to be a close friend, a big brother and a protector. Things were never dull when Pete was around. He made things happen, but sometimes things happened to him. Pete owned and operated a poolroom, so there were many times when a fight took place. There were many brawls between his customers and himself.

One night, after closing his place of business, Pete and two of his companions were assaulted by a few of his enemies. Pete's friends took off, leaving Pete to fight the thugs single-handed. During the fight, one of the men drew a razor and cut the back of Pete's neck, which made him so furious that even though he was outnumbered, he fought them until they ran scared. Pete hurried to a doctor's office about a mile away, and, as he entered the door, collapsed on the floor from exhaustion and loss of blood. Pete had to receive many stitches to close the wound, which left him with ugly, jagged scars for the rest of his life. Whenever I gave Pete a haircut and shave, I cringed at the sight of his scars, but happy he escaped with his life.

Even after that unfortunate incident, Pete had no fear. He always felt he could take care of himself. He liked and respected me to the extent that he was always ready to protect me. For instance, I was having some difficulty with the owner of the drugstore near my shop. He would tell others, "someone should drive that Greek out of town for good!" I had no idea why he felt that way, because I never did anything to offend him. Anyway, I told Pete about it one evening, and shortly after that things seemed to quiet down. You wouldn't believe it, but that same fellow became one of my best customers. I am sure that Pete must have stopped by the drugstore one day, and he and the proprietor had a little talk. At any rate, that was the sort of friend Pete was—if you were his friend, there was nothing he wouldn't do for you.

One day, much to my surprise, Pete told me that he was returning to Greece to rejoin his family. It was a very sad time for me. To show my affection, I sent him a year's subscription to Life Magazine for him to enjoy. Each month he would be able to read about America, which he also loved. That was my way of saying "thanks" for all that he had done for me and my family.



Peter Kokinos, my best friend and Godfather to my Son, Peter.

Meanwhile, my son Peter was the joy of my life, and when he was about four months old a carnival came to town and set up near my shop. Thinking of my son, I took some time off to see if I could win a prize to bring home. I stopped at one booth to look at the prizes, and a man in the booth asked me to put down a coin and win a puppy. I felt lucky and put the coin on number 15 just before he spun the wheel. When it stopped, the pointer was on 15, and I was the owner of a tiny white puppy. I took him home and my wife and son fell in love with him instantly. Thomai was so happy she kissed me and named the puppy Whitey, who became like one of the family and whom we enjoyed for many years.

When my son, Pete, was about fifteen months old, he suddenly became sick with convulsions, which occurred from time to time. Nothing we did at home gave him relief. The doctor in town gave him medication, but that didn't help either. It was not until a few months later that my son got better during a visit to Thomai's brother in Cincinnati, Ohio. The train ride there was miserable, it was hot and humid, and we were bothered by flies... the worst conditions for a sick baby. However, as soon as we arrived, Thomai's brother, feeling sorry for the baby, took Pete to his doctor, who prescribed a medicine that finally cured him of his convulsions.

We had, in the meantime, moved to a rented seven-room flat on 62nd Street, Argo, where my second son, George, was born... on October 7, 1918. Once again my wife refused to have her baby in the hospital, but this time a midwife was present. As with little Pete, there were no complications during George's birth, but he made his presence known immediately and loudly. My friends and I were so startled by his loud outburst from the bedroom, that one of the men hollered, "Hey Caruso!" George was not destined to be a singer, but a wonderfully talented violinist.

As George grew up, he would warm my heart on many occasions. He was the type of child whose love, sincerity and mischief were all able to surface at one time in one action. When he was four or five, there would be a regular occurrence just before I left the house to go to work. George would cry,

“Daddy, let me kiss you goodbye.” So, I would bend down and he would plant a kiss on my cheek. I thought that was it, so I’d proceed. He would let me walk a few steps before he yelled out his request again; once again, I bent down and so on. Then he would ask one more time... well, this would have gone on all day long if my wife did not step into the picture. She would swoop him off his feet, give him a bear hug and kiss and distract him until I ran out.

Shortly after George’s birth, in November of 1918, my brother Nick approached me with an idea to improve the business. Because I was a newspaper agent already, he thought of renting a lot and putting a small building on it, where we would be able to operate the newspaper agency, as well as sell cigars, cigarettes, candy, gum and other items. I thought it was a good idea and we immediately began to work on the project. We rented a lot from Mr. Knoedler, purchased the lumber, and had it delivered. Construction was just about ready to begin when we came to a dead halt. Mr. Knoedler informed us that one of his tenants in a nearby building had learned of our venture and was furious. This tenant also owned and operated a candy and cigar shop, and feared strong competition. Mr. Knoedler, however, said that instead of renting, we would still be able to carry out our plan, if we purchased the lot. The owner was asking twenty-five hundred dollars. Nick thought that amount too high for the two of us and he decided to visit our brother, Spiro, who was living in Indiana, to try to convince him to be a partner.

Nick left for Indiana to talk to Spiro, but while there became ill. He wrote me that he didn’t feel good, that he was drinking a lot of water, and lacked energy. I immediately wrote and told him to see a doctor, who diagnosed his condition as diabetes. I became very concerned when I learned from a doctor the seriousness of this disease, and wrote Nick to return to Chicago. When he arrived, he looked to be “skin and bones”. I immediately took him to Washington Boulevard Hospital in Chicago, where the doctors were able to get his condition under control. As long as Nick adhered to his prescribed diet, he had no trouble, but as soon as he felt a little better and received passes to leave the hospital, he would visit his sister-in-law, where he would eat foods that were not allowed in his diet. He decided to leave the hospital and watch his diet himself. He reasoned that if he couldn’t do it at home, he

would admit himself to the Cook County Hospital, where he would be cared for without charge. I would visit him in the hospital every Thursday, and at the same time, give him a shave. He suffered for about two years with diabetes—in and out of hospitals. Nick sensed that he was going to die, and after a particular Thursday visit, he pleaded with me to come Friday also. It was difficult for me to go the next day, because I had to take care of my barber business and my family. Little did I know that he was near death.

The next day, Nick asked the nurse to phone me, but she failed to do so, and later that day he died. I would have dropped everything to be with him if the call had come. But I didn't know of his death until early the next morning, when I received a call from the hospital that my brother had passed away. I took a streetcar to the hospital and, not thinking, went straight to his room. The man in the other bed asked me if the nurse had called me the night before. He said that Nick had struggled to remain alive, waiting for me to come. I recall viewing his dead body... his face had a frightened expression on it. To this day, I wonder if there was something that he wanted to tell me before he died.

I arranged for his funeral, and had his body transported by train to Elmwood Cemetery, Elmwood Park, Illinois, where he rests. I loved my brother Nick. We were very close, and it was difficult for me to see him suffer during the last two years. He was never able to return to his wife and family in Greece, and it was my responsibility to write and inform them of his death. On many occasions, during his hospitalization, I would write to his family. I would ask Nick what he wanted to say to them. He would tell me to say he was all right. I know how he felt about his family because I had children of my own. I told Nick not to worry, because I was doing well in my business, and I was able to care for his family too. I made a promise to him that later was difficult to keep, but I managed to do so, even to the extent of having to borrow money to send to his family in Greece. I missed him and found it difficult to control my feelings, but being young and having Thomai with me was a big help.

It was during the summer of 1920 when Thomai was about to give birth to our third child, Mary, when I experienced a problem with the business. My business was doing well: Spiro, my younger brother, Sam, my cousin, and

Paul, a friend from the same Greek village, were my employees. One morning when I went to the shop, I was surprised to find it closed, with Paul, one of my barbers, standing by the door. I asked where Spiro and Sam were, and he said, "I don't know." I went inside and found Spiro and Sam's barber cabinets cleaned out. Paul then admitted to me that Sam and Spiro had taken their tools and were on their way to Gary, Indiana. He also said that he had intentions of joining them. I stood there in disbelief. I was in a tough spot and had to think what to do. I was without barbers... so I said to Paul "Why do you want to go? You're making good money here. Are you that dissatisfied with me?" I knew that I was going to have an awful time finding good barbers in such a short time. When he didn't answer, I said, "I'll make you a proposition, Paul. If you can come up with twelve hundred dollars, we can become partners in this business." But all that Paul was able to come up with was five hundred dollars. I accepted the five hundred dollars as down payment, and the balance to be paid within six months. Paul accepted my proposition. We had an agreement that if Spiro should return, we would make him a partner. Business was going well and we employed more barbers. In the meantime, Spiro was living somewhere in Indiana, working for the railroad.

Thomai and I were living in a two-story rented home in Argo when my first daughter, Mary, was born on June 9, 1920. Dr. Barclay and a midwife were present for her birth, which took place at home. I was extremely happy that we were blessed with a girl and, as it turned out, she was to occupy a very special part of my heart throughout my life. I remember being concerned that she was born with a rash all over her body, but the doctors told us not to worry.

After Mary's birth, I decided to purchase a home from the Corn Products Refining Company, who built homes for their employees. The homes of the common workers were on the north side of Argo, and I bought one located at 6048 75th Court, for thirty-five hundred dollars. It was a good investment, since the house had two stories and the lot was large enough for me to add rooms to the back. This would allow me to have family members living with us and also be able to rent out some rooms to our close friends.

Tom Zotos, who was a customer in my barber shop, was one of the renters who became a very close friend of the family. He took part in our lives as one of the family and stayed with us for twelve years, until he returned to Albania to marry a young lady by the name of Gloria Samaras. Tom and Gloria remained very close friends. Even after the death of Tom, Gloria still visits us on a regular basis.

After two years' time, Spiro returned to Argo and lived with me and my family. Even though my brother Spiro never explained why he left me, I found it in my heart to take him back. I remained true to my promise and made him a partner in the barber shop with Paul and me. After a few months, I asked Spiro to write to our father to let him know how we were coming along. For whatever reason, he put his letter on a table, unsealed, for me to see. I won't go into any detail, but I was hurt because he falsely accused me of treating him unjustly. I sat down and thought about his accusations and could not believe some of the things he wrote. I never mailed that letter and eventually disposed of it. This feeling of hurt remained with me for many years. But no matter what... time heals, and "blood is thicker than water". He is my brother and I love him.

Spiro stayed and worked with me in the barber shop for about five months. Then he became restless and wanted out. Paul and I worked out an agreeable price and paid Spiro his share of the business. Spiro then found a job with the Wagner Coal Company, stayed there for a while, then went to work for the Corn Products Company, both in Argo, Illinois.

Paul and I once again owned the shop, which was doing fine, but I wanted to do better financially. A friend who was a distant cousin of my wife approached me with a business deal. His name was George Tsenzoff and was selling crushed fruit and syrup to soda companies. He convinced me that there was a great deal of money to be made if we went into business for ourselves. I was very interested and presented the idea to Paul, my partner. He agreed and we wasted no time investing seven hundred dollars. But, as the business began Operation, we realized that we were actually losing money, for our costs exceeded our profits. When Paul realized the situation, he denied that he had ever wanted a partnership in the syrup business. I did not

appreciate him going back on his word, and wanted no further business deals with him. I offered to buy his share of the barber shop, willing to give him twelve hundred dollars for it. Paul, in turn, said he would buy me out. Because I was eager to get rid of him at any price, I signed a contract making him sole owner of the barber shop. Now I was in hot water! I had no business, lost money, and had gallons and gallons of crushed fruit.

From the crushed fruit business, I went into the soda business with Mr. Walter Durka of Argo. We started the Argo Beverage Company, which was similar to the Lomax Company I used to work for. We did all the work ourselves—building the body of the truck to transport the beverage bottles, to bottling, to loading the trucks, and finally to distributing them to the saloons.

There were problems, however. The root beer did not mix properly with the carbonated water. We had it analyzed by the Liquid Carbonic Company, who discovered that there was too much iron in the water, which was the result of using well water.

I became unhappy with the problems of the business, because I was working harder than I did in the barber shop. My wife was also concerned about the long hours I was working. Mr. Durka saw that I wasn't satisfied with this type of business and offered to pay me what money I had invested. I took his offer and happy to be out of it. I thought the soda business would give me more freedom, but I was wrong. I knew the barber business had its problems. It was difficult having customers waiting for me all the time. I didn't want to lose them, so I had to hurry the haircuts, shaves and massages, and still do the kind of work that I was satisfied with. I took my work seriously and wanted my customers to look their best. At times, there were as many as eighteen customers waiting in a four-chair barber shop. I tried to get away from what I thought at that time was torture, by going into another business, but I found through experience that other businesses, such as the crushed fruit and the Argo Beverage Company, had their share of troubles. I was now convinced that I belonged in the barber shop business.

I want you to know that I still entertained the idea of returning to Greece to spend the rest of my life there. I knew that I could make better investments in

that country because the U. S. dollar was worth more in Greece. But it wasn't that simple. I now had a wife and three children: Pete, George and Mary, and I had to give the matter considerable thought. I began to think of the future of my children—it would have been very difficult to give them the right kind of life in Greece. Then and there, I decided that since my children had been born in America, it was their country, and it was to be my country, too. I started to plan my future here. Of course, I would want to return to visit my folks, relatives and friends in the old country.

I began to prepare to become an American citizen. I am proud and happy to say that I experienced no trouble receiving my citizenship papers and became a citizen of the United States of America in the year 1920.

So, in review, at this stage of my life, I had sold my part of the barber shop to Paul; I tried and became disillusioned with two businesses; three children were born to Thomai and me; America was to be our permanent home; and I was without a business or a job.

My next move was to consider real estate. I had plans to have a barber shop and my home in the same building, if that was possible. I heard that there was a property for sale in the vicinity of 63rd and Kedzie Avenue in Chicago, which would suit my purposes. A real estate agent showed me two lots with a frame building, which already had a barber shop on it, and which was selling for ten thousand dollars. I was definitely interested and made an offer of eighty-five hundred dollars, but since the owner was away on his vacation, the transaction had to wait. When he returned, he said that only one of the lots was now for sale, since he had sold the other lot. I was still interested, because he was willing to sell the one lot and building for seventy-five hundred dollars. I wanted to be assured that the barber on the property would sell me his fixtures (such as chairs, mirrors, etc.) after I bought the lot. The barber asked seven hundred dollars for the fixtures, but he also said that he was planning to build his own barber shop on the lot across the street. I don't know if he was bluffing or trying to discourage me from buying the property, but I could not take the chance of him creating competition for me if he carried out his bluff.

I kept on looking for other locations. I was an easy man to be convinced by real estate dealers. I went to Clearing, another suburb of Chicago, and stopped in at a real estate office owned by a Mr. Colinan. He showed me a lot on 63rd Street near Central Avenue. it was another ideal spot for a business and living quarters. I was very serious and gave a deposit of fifty dollars, and asked him to have the deeds ready for me to sign. I was all “fired up” with enthusiasm, and discussed the purchase of the property in Clearing with some folks in Argo. They were my friends and said that Argo was a better place to begin a business. They had my best interest at heart, so I stopped further negotiations and lost the fifty dollars deposit. I thought it was better to be out fifty dollars than eight or ten thousand by the time I got through building on the property. It was fifty dollars spent for a lesson well-learned.

My friends said there was a vacant lot for sale that might interest me. It was located at 6305 Archer Square in Argo, in the center of town, near a post office and a bank. It was an ideal location for a barber shop. When I looked at the lot, I had a good feeling about it and decided to buy it at a cost of one thousand, nine-hundred twenty-five-dollars, the year, 1920. Now I was all set to erect a building to my own liking but had absolutely no idea about contracting or building. With a little searching, I found a building being erected in Clearing. I approached the contractor, who showed and explained the blue prints of the building to me. I told him I would like the same type of building to be erected in Argo on my lot, but to be four feet deeper, which would make the size twenty-five feet by 150 feet with a full basement. We started to talk business, and after paying for the lot, I had about three thousand dollars left, besides five thousand drachmas (one thousand U. S. dollars) in a bank in Athens, no job, no income, except for a few roomers in our home. Mortgaging my future was a very bold step on my part, because I did not believe in borrowing money. In addition, I had to come up with more money to satisfy the contractor. I borrowed five hundred dollars from Nick Nanos at six percent, Nisi Dasi lent me five hundred dollars without interest, and finally, my son Pete’s godfather, who owned a candy shop, gave me eight hundred dollars on the spot. He didn’t even want a receipt, because he trusted me. My mortagage from the building and loan association was twelve thousand dollars; my monthly payments were one hundred fifty dollars.



Building at 6305 Archer Square, Argo, Illinois.

I was terrified at the figures, especially without a present job or income. However, I was full of ambition. I felt I could get a job or even buy my old shop back again. I began making plans about renting the building when it would be completed. I had to be sure that my family was cared for, fed and clothed properly. Fortunately my credit was good, and I wanted to keep it that way.

I recall, as the foundation of the building was going up, the mayor of Argo approached me saying, "Mike, what are you building for? You can buy Corn Products shares at five dollars a share." Looking back, I should have taken his advice, because Corn Products became an international company, the maker of Mazola Oil, Karo Syrup and many other fine products. I would be a rich man today.

When the building was completed, it consisted of a basement, first floor and second floor. I rented the first floor for one hundred dollars a month to a

Greek gentlemen who operated a coffee shop. The second floor, which consisted of offices and an apartment, was rented to Dr. Neno for one hundred twenty-five dollars a month. That income almost covered my payments and all expenses, such as taxes, fire insurance, coal and general bills. Things were beginning to look up.

I wanted to do something with the unrented basement. I found a partner by the name of Nick Christ, and together opened a laundry in my basement. Neither of us had any money or experience in the laundry business, but we managed by using credit. We bought laundry equipment from a laundry in Lemont that went out of business, and worked for hours and hours to install it. The laundry business was not only hard work but very demanding, and it wasn't long when I realized I could do much better in the barber business. Nick was happy with the business and bought my share, taking a five year lease. I received thirty dollars a month for rent and ten dollars a month payment for my share on the equipment.

Temporarily, I rented a two-chair shop in Summit, which was only a mile away from my building on Archer Square in Argo. In the meantime, my brother Spiro and a friend operated a Greek restaurant and had difficulty making a go of it. When they finally closed its doors, Spiro was without a job. At the same time, I learned that Paul was having serious financial difficulties, and was having problems with the barber business and was anxious to sell. Since Spiro was out of work, I suggested that we buy Paul's barber shop together. Spiro said he had no money, but I told him I would take the responsibility. The total cost for the business was twenty-five hundred dollars. The contract, which was for a period of fifteen months, was agreed upon and signed. I received the keys and we were in business. I could see that I was finally settled and on the way to prosperity.

I was blessed with another son, Arthur, who was born October 25, 1923, with Dr. Mann and a midwife attending. I remember that my wife had a difficult delivery. Dr. Mann told me I was a lucky man that my wife lived through the birth. I certainly thanked God!

About this time, my brother Spiro, who was courting a fine young woman

named Chrisoula, got married. They lived with us for about a year and a half, until Spiro decided to buy a barber shop of his own in Chicago. Spiro sold his share to me and moved to Chicago. I became the sole owner of my barber shop once again. At that time, I thanked the Lord that I was free again.

Of course, I had to work hard, giving haircuts and shaves all day long, day in and day out. I was planning that one day after my property was paid for, I would sell it for a profit and buy a comfortable home for my family. The company home that we were living in was adequate, but I wanted better living conditions for my wife and family.

The barber shop was doing well. I was satisfied with the service my barbers gave the customers. There seemed to be no dissention between them... they were making good money. Of course, I was on the job right along with them, but I took time to eat my dinner and be with my wife and four children.

During those years as a barber, I can recall one famous, or infamous, customer I served for a number of years. It was the beginning of organized crime, and Al Capone was one of the celebrities of that period who frequented my shop. I think he was a Rumanian by nationality, was very businesslike, and did not engage in trivial conversation. He had an expressionless face and always was accompanied by two or three men in black suits. He would always request a shave and a haircut, and tip very generously. He would then leave quietly with his bodyguards in big black cars. Since his headquarters were not far from Argo, he was a steady customer. Whenever I saw his car approaching my shop, I would say to myself, here comes one of my best customers. After some time, he moved to Chicago and was involved in big time racketeering.

I think back to the days during the Depression when I felt I was always in danger of losing my building at 6305 Archer Square... it took years off my life. After all, that building meant everything to me. I had worked hard all of my life to get where I was, sacrificing many pleasures in order to save. While the building had tenants, my life ran smoothly, and I could manage. I even paid back all the money that I borrowed from my friends, and continued taking care of my family in Greece.

Getting back to my story, it was about the year 1927 when a former employee of mine, Nick Tsourmas, was going back to the old country to get married. After all my bills were paid and loans were settled, I had seven hundred dollars left, which I decided to send to my father with Nick. After a year's time, Nick returned to work in my barber shop. He was so happy to be back in the U.S.A. that he knelt down and kissed the ground. In a few years, he saved enough money to call for his wife and baby. His story seems to have been modeled after mine, and I'm sure that he, too, never forgot his family in Greece.

After my building was rented for about five years, it became vacant and, once again, I was forced to make a decision. I thought it better to sell my home at 6048-75th Court, the company home, and keep my property at 6305 Archer Square. I sold the home and moved into my building and converted the back of the first floor into a four-room apartment. I opened an ice cream parlor in the front part. I had a friend manage it, since I operated a barber shop. One of my friends predicted that the parlor was going to be a failure, a "white elephant", so, I called the ice cream shop "The White Elephant". Pete, George, Mary and Arthur enjoyed it tremendously, having milk shakes whenever they wanted. The second floor of the building was rented to a dentist, and Nick Christ still managed his laundry in the basement.

My wife, Thomai, became sick while we were living in the four-room flat. Her doctor, Dr. Clark, treated her for bronchitis. MY wife thought she was pregnant with our fifth child, but Dr. Clark insisted that was impossible. She spent five days in the LaGrange Hospital being treated for bronchitis. I would visit her in the hospital, and going back to the barber shop, I would feel sorry for her. George Tzenzoff told me to take Thomai to a very fine and reputable pharmacist. The pharmacist gave her two different kinds of medicine and after a short period of time, she felt much better. Her appetite improved and she slept at night. It was like magic. It turned out that Thomai was pregnant and I decided to take the entire family on a ten-day vacation to Lake Wandawega in Wisconsin. We all had a Wonderful time. I especially loved taking pictures of the whole family. I can still picture my wife in a bathing suit, pregnant with Esther. The vacation was good and invigorating for all of us.



Family vacation in Wandawega, Wisconsin.

When we returned home, it was back to reality. The signs of the Great Depression were all around us. My barber business went down fifty percent. Many lost everything. I remember a fellow who deposited seven thousand dollars in the bank that closed the same day. The poor man lost all of it, his life's savings. For my part, I lost property valued at about ten thousand dollars. No one really came out of the depression unscathed.

When things settled down somewhat, I sold my "White Elephant" and we then rented a six-room first floor apartment in Argo, where Esther was born, November 19, 1929. Because Thomai was in labor for many hours, Dr. Pluchinski was kind enough to stay with her. Pete, George and Mary went for their music lessons, then to a movie that evening. When they

returned, they found they had an addition to the family. Mary was especially happy to have a sister. We stayed in that apartment for about one year and then moved to a brand new building, known as the Siderook building, where we rented an apartment. We were its first tenant. The apartment was beautiful, much larger and very comfortable. We lived there for about three years. By this time, my tenants in the building at 6305 Archer Avenue were not doing well and it was vacant again. Unfortunately, I was forced to move my family to my own property, because I could not afford to maintain the apartment with my building being vacant. We occupied the entire second floor, even the existing offices were converted into bedrooms since my family now numbered five children. It was a disappointing change for all of us, and the only advantage was that it was close to my work. My shop was across the street and I was able to go home frequently during the day.

By now, the early 1930's, I was a well-established and respected individual in the village of Argo, when an incident occurred that I knew had to be taken care of. There was an empty store next to my building and home, and I learned of the owner's intention to operate a house of ill-repute. I immediately took action. My two boys and I, dressed in our Sunday-best clothes, made a visit to Mayor Wilson and informed him of what was about to open in his town. The mayor quickly put a stop to it and that was the end of such a business. Of course, a few townspeople who were interested in a little diversion of that sort, were somewhat angry with me and disappointed, that... "The Best Little Whorehouse" in town was not meant to be in ARGO!

1933 was a memorable year, for a fellow Greek country man and I established a social organization called the Brotherhood of Slimnitsis in America. We founded it because we were proud of our Greek heritage and wanted to have a benevolent organization through which we, the members and our families, could enjoy our Greek culture and continue the many beautiful traditions and practices. We would get together every August 15, the feast of the Assumption. As was done in Greece, we would roast a lamb outdoors and celebrate with eating, drinking and dancing. The organization was conducted like a regular club—with an elected president, secretary and treasurer. As the years progressed, the club grew, and branches were formed in Canada and Australia. As it grew internationally, the name was changed to Grammos, which means "Big Mountain" in Greek. It was an appropriate

name, because, as I think back of my younger years in Slimnitsa, I recall looking out the window and seeing a huge snow-covered mountain. I was proud to serve as the treasurer of the organization in 1939 and more proud to be its president in 1946.

Chapter Eight

“Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy burdened and I will give you rest.” Matt. 11.28

I received a great deal of joy and happiness from my children as they were growing up. The three oldest, Pete, George and Mary, at this time, were taking music lessons... the boys violin and Mary the piano. They were all good students and it looked as though their careers might be in the music field.

I wanted the boys to have better violins so I got a catalogue from the Wurlitzer Music Company. The boys chose two violins from the catalog, which totaled fifteen hundred dollars. There was no way I could afford them at that price, so I told the boys to go down to the music store and offer the owner three hundred dollars for both violins. I suggested that they offer to pay thirty dollars down and thirty dollars a month until the balance was paid in full. The Wurlitzer Company surprised me by accepting the offer.

Mary's piano was a baby grand, also purchased from the Wurlitzer Company for about twelve hundred dollars, which I paid for in monthly payments. I wasn't able to get a bargain for the piano, though. Mary also took ballet lessons at a dance studio located above the Stone Department Store in Argo. She really enjoyed herself with music and that made me very happy.

They did well and I was very proud of them. I figured that in years to come, Pete, George and Mary would be able to make money in the music field and would have it much easier than I had in making a living. Listening to their music gave me great pleasure and filled me with pride.

I was especially proud of my daughter, Mary. In March, 1934, Mary was in a program at her school, celebrating Greek Independence Day. Dressed in a costume representing Macedonia, Mary played the piano and sang the Greek national anthem, and Pete and George accompanied her on their violins. They did exceptionally well, and my wife and I received many compliments on

their performance.

Shortly thereafter, Mary complained of pains in the left side of her back. She was thirteen years old at the time. For eighteen days, she was examined by several doctors. One diagnosed her pain as diaphragmic pleursy and taped her side, predicting she would be well in a few weeks. When her condition did not seem to improve, I sought another doctor.

Mary was still not able to rest because of the intense nerve pain in her back. The second doctor's opinion was that Mary was suffering from a simple cold in her back, so he administered ultra-violet-ray treatments and massaged her back. After the first treatment, Mary received some relief and was able to sleep for about six hours. She seemed so peaceful as she slept, I thought everything would return to normal again. But after she awoke, the pain became all the more intense and she complained more. Once again, she was given the ultra-violet treatment, but this time received no relief. She was then taken to the hospital for x-rays, where a staff of doctors examined the x-rays, but could not come up with a conclusive diagnosis. We brought her home and tried a third doctor, who diagnosed Mary's pain as tuberculosis. It was difficult for me to understand that tuberculosis would begin in her back, and I found it difficult to deal with the inability of doctors to ease her pain. Even though the medicine she was taking made her sleepy, it did not ease the pain. As she suffered more and more, I found myself becoming angry with the doctors. All they were able to do was administer drugs to make her drowsy, but the pain persisted. One doctor thought Mary's illness was psychosomatic, that she was not really sick and in pain, but thought she was.

As time went on, Mary started to lose control of her legs, then control of her bladder and bowel. Mary still had considerable pain, so I inquired about a specialist. Before I could secure one, Mary's godfather sent yet another doctor to examine her. This doctor was alarmed at the amount of medicine in Mary's system and asked that we discontinue the medicines for four days. By this time, she had lost all reflexes and feelings in her legs. She couldn't distinguish between hot and cold applications, and the paralysis seemed to be spreading higher and higher.

Finally, after three weeks of doctors and various treatments, a specialist was called to the house, who advised us to rush her to the hospital immediately. This was the morning of April 12, 1934. I hired an ambulance and rushed her there. That evening Mary was operated on. The diagnosis was transverse myelitis with epidural abscess. The abscess was removed from her spine and the pain was relieved. I was haunted by the thought that had I acted differently or sooner, Mary might have been spared what she went through. The doctors reassured me that I had done everything that was possible as a father, and that there was nothing else I could have done.

I hired nurses to stay with Mary around the clock, and Thomai was always by her side. I tried to carry on with my business and take care of the boys, but my mind was always on Mary in the hospital. Three days after the surgery, Mary had to be operated on again, for her incision was healing too rapidly and the doctors were afraid that the pains could resume.

So, on Sunday, April 15, Mary was operated on again and the doctors left the incision open to heal itself. I was a donor for Mary's blood transfusions. She remained in the hospital for eighteen long days, and was steadily getting better. The doctors could not give me any encouragement and said there was no hope for a complete recovery. The very first time when the nurse changed Mary's bandages, my wife turned her back so she would not see the incision, but accidentally saw the wound in the mirror and fainted. After eighteen days, with the doctor's approval, I took Mary home, because it was easier for her to be at home, and I wouldn't have to take Thomai to and from the hospital everyday. Also, it was easier for me financially, because the hospital cost was twenty-one dollars a day, which was a great deal of money then.

We did our very best to help Mary. She had about six pressure sores. The incision had to be treated, and she had to be catheterized daily. One of the Metropolitan nurses, Mrs. Buckner, showed my wife how to treat Mary's bedsores with castor oil, and how to change the bandages. She would come during her lunch hour and would take no pay for her services. Thomai never complained and was always optimistic. She changed Mary's bandages every single day.

Of course, Mary deserves a great deal of credit. She would lie patiently in bed, always with a beautiful smile on her face. Her disposition was wonderful despite what she was going through. The graduating class of Graves Grammar School in Argo, along with Dr. Tate, the minister of Argo Congregational Church, came to visit Mary in June of 1934. Mary was to have graduated with them and they all brought presents and made her very happy. Dr. Tate visited me in the barber shop that same day and asked me if I would step outside because he wanted to talk to me privately. I remember him telling me that my daughter was going to die. I said she will not die because I believe in Jesus Christ. What made me say this to a minister of the church? I can't say, except that the words came from within me. I thank God, Mary is still alive, fifty-one years later.

In the course of time, we were willing to try anything that would help Mary. We received no encouragement from the doctors, so we did everything on our own. We tried spiritualists, healers, chiropractors, and various electric treatments. One of our friends in Argo suggested that I bring Mary to one of their church services, because there was a healer present. Another friend suggested placing Mary in a barrel of water with herbs and spices. And we went as far as to do all of that, but none of the remedies proved to be effective—Mary still had no feeling.

During Mary's sickness, I did not send my father in Greece any money. Finally, my father wrote me a letter, and one sentence especially stands out in my mind. It read, "All my life, you fed me; I ate the entire steer. And now you are tired on the tail?" He meant that I had taken care of him and the family for so long, and now that his end was approaching, I stopped helping him. In spite of the humorous way he put it, that hurt me very much, but I had so many troubles of my own, I could do no more.

Even though Mary was paralyzed from the waist down, she still enjoyed a happy family life and everyone made every effort to include her in their activities. It was easy, for she was always so pleasant that her physical handicap was overlooked.

Her older brothers, Pete and George, especially, made Mary a part of their

life. The boys went downtown quite often and many times would take Mary along for the ride. They would carry her down a flight of stairs and place her in the car. They'd take her along with their girl friends, whether boating, picknicking or swimming. At times, Thomai and I would join them also. There was happiness surrounding us all the time. We were and are a very close family.

We also had many wonderful friends who were eager to help in any way they could. For instance, Emily Dineff would make herself and her car available whenever it was necessary to take Mary to the doctor for treatments. Chris and Dora Dineff were also very close friends. I remember Chris and George, his brother, carrying Mary down the stairs on many occasions. They were always welcomed in our home. Thomai was considered like a "mother" to them and would prepare dinner as part of the family.

I recall writing a letter to Christ Dineff in August of 1950 stating: "Dear Chris: I want to write a personal letter to you covering many things. In the beginning I would like to state that our friendship is more than a friendship—it is sort of like a relationship. How did it come about? It started way back when you, George and Steve were in the old country. Back in those days we were helpful to one another. My family was respected and lots of favors were bestowed upon them. I remember I was never refused transportation on many occasions. My daughter was taken to the doctor by both Lazo and Emily many times. These are things that are hard to erase and I don't want to erase them from my memory."

We continued to follow every lead to help Mary. A friend advised us to take Mary to Davenport, Iowa to a special hospital that was equipped with an encephalo-menthol-typograph, a machine capable of determining whether a person's body has any feeling or sensitivity from the upper to the lower extremities. Pete took off from work and drove Mary, Thomai and me to this hospital. When we arrived, the technician informed us that the machine was out of order. So, the entire trip was made in vain. Someone else then suggested that I send Mary to Warm Springs, Georgia for treatments. I decided to write a letter to President Franklin Roosevelt, explaining Mary's condition. Since he, himself, I understand was receiving treatments there as a

result of his condition with polio, I thought he would have compassion and help me with my situation. But I never recieved a response to my letter, perhaps it never reached his desk.

I heard of the Milton H. Berry School for Paralysis & Spastic Corrections, located in Encino, California, and made a trip there with friends from Argo with the hope that Mary could be cured. While there, I learned that some of the patients were walking with the aid of leg braces. I also learned that plans were under way to open a branch of the school in Chicago, and that Mary could be measured for braces in Wauconda, Wisconsin and then fitted at the Chicago branch.

When I arrived home from California, I had to make plans to take Mary to Winconsin. Because I did not have a car, one of my customers, Joe Samatovic, who was a friend, was willing to drive Mary, Thomai and I there. Although he spent the entire day with us, he only charged me twenty-five dollars.

Mary was fitted for braces at the Milton H. Berry School in Chicago at a cost of seven-hundred-and-fifty dollars. She began walking with the aid of crutches, a back brace and leg braces. It was a thrill beyond words to see her standing and take a few steps. Eventually, she was able to walk with canes and was doing quite well, but the braces caused pressure sores and she would have to remain in bed while the sores healed. We would repeat the process time and time again, and finally had to give it up. The sores would always confine her in bed, until they could be healed, which took many days.



Mary in her braces, with Dad.

Around Christmas time, Paul Bishop, who was a customer of mine, asked me if Mary would like a dog for a present. "She'd love to have a dog," I said, and on Christmas Eve, Paul brought Mary a box containing a tiny black cocker spaniel with a big red ribbon tied around its neck. Mary was thrilled beyond words and immediately named her Wally after Wallis Simpson, the American divorcee, who married King Edward of England. We were to enjoy many Christmases with Wally.

I wanted to help Mary get around the house on her own and talked to the salesman from Emil J. Paidar, barber chair manufacturers, about making a chair for her. They were very helpful and constructed a leather chair with wheels on each side so that Mary could propel it herself. Other wheel chairs at that time were large, heavy and cumbersome, hard to maneuver. The newly constructed barber wheelchair gave Mary her independence in the house. She thought it was great. She could go from the dining room to the kitchen, to the bedroom, on her own. What a wonderful feeling. Now this gave me the idea of raising the piano so that Mary could get her chair under the keyboard. A carpenter made blocks of wood to support the piano legs and once again Mary was playing the piano.

I can remember one Christmas Eve when I received a pair of "loud pajamas" from the children, and naturally they wanted me to try them on. Wally didn't recognize me and barked continually. We all had such a good laugh. Christmas was really a warm, happy, family get-together for us all. I worked late on Christmas Eve and was anxious to get home because everyone would be waiting for me.

Mary kept getting better and better and was able to transfer herself in and out of the wheel chair. A good friend of the family by the name of Steve Dineff, who visited Mary quite often, was interested in doing something for Mary. He came to my shop one day and said he would be able to build an electric car for Mary for forty-five dollars, one that she could drive all by herself. He had friends, who also knew Mary, that were employed in the machine shop of Corn Products Company, and all the tools and equipment necessary were at

their disposal. In a week or so, the electric car was completed and I was anxious to see Mary drive it. When she first saw it, a three-wheel, gray apparatus that looked like a boat, she hesitated, but when she sat in the car and drove it, she was thrilled. All the controls were done by hand, and she enjoyed driving all over town with her little dog, Wally, visiting friends and especially stopping at the barber shop. I was extremely happy to see Mary so independent. It made me proud when she'd visit me in front of the barber shop. She drove around in that electric car for a number of years.



Mary in her electric car with Mother and Esther.

I continued working hard and in order to better myself professionally, I enrolled in the Olivio Course of Barber Science, sponsored by the Master Barbers' Association. The last time I was in school was forty years ago, in Greece. I was now one of nineteen students in a course that consisted of forty evening classes, each lasting two hours, during a period of twenty weeks. Besides haircuts and shaves, I learned how to administer scalp treatments and facial massages. As a result of this course, I was also able to answer customers' questions such as, "Why is my hair falling out? what is dandruff?"

and what kind of shampoo is best for my hair?”

After I satisfactorily completed the course, I received a BBS Degree in Barber Science. The headline of the local daily newspaper, The Desplaines Valley News, read. “Barbers Go Pro As Grads Get Real Diplomas.” We were the first graduating class.

After graduation, my business improved considerably, and I was glad that I could do more than just barbering. My shop had the reputation for shaves that were so relaxing, that they were equal to six hours sleep. Scalp treatments cost two dollars fifty cents and up, shaves were twenty-five cents and a massage with hot towels was fifty cents. Even women frequented my shop for a facial massage. I would use Bona Cella cream, vanishing cream and mud packs for facials, and I was one of the first shops in town to cut and style women’s hair.

Two weeks after sending my father twenty-five dollars, I received a letter of his death, which was in the year 1937. I remember him rolling his own cigarettes and smoking them one after another. Some years later; a woman teacher, who came to the United States and who had lived in my father’s home in Slimnitsa, told me of my father’s death. She said that one morning when he awakened he asked for a lighted candle. He then laid it down and told everyone present that when the candle went out, he would die. That’s exactly what happened.

Chapter Nine

“A very happy life with Michael”

My wife and I celebrated our silver anniversary in 1937... twenty-five years of being happily married. On one occasion I overheard Thomai telling her friends and neighbors over the fence that she “has a very happy life with Michael.” That made my life worthwhile. I was now 48 years old.

Our children were growing up. Peter and George were working as chief clerks at the Electro-Motive Corporation in LaGrange, Illinois, where they manufactured diesel engines and diesel locomotives. Arthur was a student at the LaGrange Junior College, pursuing a course in Aeronautical engineering. During the summer months and in his spare time, Arthur helped in the barber shop as an apprentice barber and eventually received his license. Mary was at home and Esther was in grade school.



My family about the year 1941.

Left to right: Pete, Esther, Arthur, Myself, Thomai, Mary, George and Wally (on Hassock).

When we became involved in World War II both my sons volunteered for service in the U. S. Navy. Both were accepted in Naval Intelligence, Peter as First Class Yeoman (later as Specialist First Class), and George as Second Class Yeoman (later as Specialist Second Class). Arthur, the youngest, was a Seaman Second Class Radioman.



Left to right: Arthur, George and Peter Metskas.

The following article appeared in the Master Barber's magazine while my sons were in the Navy: I was extremely proud of my sons serving their country.

Three Metskas' Fighting For Democracy

The Navy can be proud of these sons of Brother Michael Metskas, a Master Barber for many years, who operates his barber shop at 6258 Archer Avenue, Argo, Illinois.

Before their enlistment in The United States Navy, Arthur Seaman 2nd Class Radioman, the younger of the brothers, age twenty, was a student at La Grange Junior College, LaGrange, pursuing a course in aeronautical engineering. During the summer months and in his spare time, Arthur helped in the barber shop as an apprentice barber, having completed the necessary course in barbering and received his license.

Both Peter, Yeoman 1st Class, age twenty-six, and George, Yeoman 2nd Class, age twenty-five, were employed at LaGrange at the General Motors' Diesel Plant as Chief Clerks. Being referred to as "twins," although they are a year apart, they have managed to stick together in their work and play. They both are excellent performers on the violin, having started the study together fifteen years ago.

Peter is stationed in the Great Lakes area and George, who has been recently transferred, is awaiting further assignment. On July 26th of last year both boys were married in a double wedding ceremony. All three are graduates of Argo Community High School.

Arthur recently received a letter from his Dad which reads as follows:

October 18, 1943

Dear Son Arthur:

Below you will find quoted, the Meditation that was spoken at your last dinner here before leaving on your assignment on September 5, 1943.

"Our Father in Heaven, as we gather here around this table to eat of this blessed food that has been prepared for us by the blessed hand of our conscientious Mother, our thoughts, which are many and of the various kind that travel far and near, at this time are centered on Arthur.

"Dear Father, as Arthur goes about to carry the orders of his superiors, we pray Dear Father, watch over him, guide him and protect him from all evil. We know Father, that Arthur is coming back to us safe and sound, but while he is away and about to meet and keep company with strangers of various characters, we pray that the Holy Spirit shall dwell upon him. We ask it in Christ's name, Amen."

I am repeating these words in order that I will be able to come to the point of the existing thought.

During the day, I am reminded of you constantly because you are missing from the shop. And during the long evenings and restless nights I am hoping that the job that Destiny gave you to do shall be done with the minimum of sacrifice.

I say that you will come back to us safe and sound, but there are some who will not come back; and all of them have Fathers, Mothers, or sweethearts and friends. I am repeating these words so that I may awaken myself to bring to my memory the great, great, grandfathers of the past ages who were agonized in order to hold fast to that which is good.

We are reading in the papers and magazines about the Post War Conveniences, and good things of life. And when we think of the boys who are not going to be here to enjoy those conveniences and good things of life, the love and affections of their loved ones, my

heart just shudders and goes to shreds; my eyes fill with tears; then I sit and start thinking.

My thoughts travel all directions, searching for consolation. That consolation comes when I am reminded that God has a plan and that plan is His plan, and we cannot do anything about it except that we go on our way and keep ourselves together. Hold fast to that which is good; help one another; this is what I am trying to do now. I want to help you, and am reminding you, whenever you find yourself in difficulties and entangled in temptation, hold yourself together and collect your thoughts. Remember, it is right to be good; stay with the spirit because the flesh is weak.

(John 11: 25-26) I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me though he were dead yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.

Your loving Dad.

Brother Metskas can well be proud of his three sons, and let us hope this invocation to the Almighty God for their protection shall be fulfilled.

MASTER BARBERS' BULLETIN

Master Barber's magazine

Although Pete and George were a year apart in age, everyone took them for twins, since they were together in work and in play. They were in the Navy together, worked in the same plant, played their music together professionally and even double-dated. So, it was quite natural for everyone to accept their announcement of being married in a double wedding ceremony. Instead of losing two sons, I was gaining two daughters.

The wedding ceremony took place on July 26, 1942, at the Greek Orthodox Church in Chicago, with Father Nestor and Father Karas officiating. Peter's bride was Sophie Pappas. Peter was already in the Navy and wore his uniform. Since he had only two days leave, there was no honeymoon trip for Pete and Sophie. George's bride was Della Belluci. George and Della spent their honeymoon in Mackinaw Island. The reception and dinner for three hundred and fifty guests was held at the Graemere Hotel in Chicago, with the orchestra furnishing music for dancing from 8:30 until midnight. The orchestra played both American and Greek music, and I recall having a wonderful time dancing and singing to Greek music.

After the war, my boys came home and settled nearby. Pete and George pursued their music careers by becoming professional violinists. They continued with their music studies and graduated from the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago. Later, both became orchestra directors in nearby elementary schools; George in the Berwyn schools and Pete in the Elmwood Park schools. In 1947, Arthur married a very fine young woman by the name of Lorna Milligan. Arthur and Lorna were also married in the same Greek Orthodox Church in Chicago and settled in the community of Bedford Park, which was but a few miles from Argo and his work as a barber.

In 1949, I decided to look for a new home for my family. We located a beautiful house that was for sale in Oak Park near public transportation and the Oak Park Hospital. We saw many homes, but this was the favorite of all. Thomai was especially pleased with the interior arrangement of the house. When my boys examined it, they were pleased and told me to go ahead with the purchase. I immediately went to the real estate agent who advised me, "When you see the rabbit, don't hesitate, but shoot!" I knew what he meant and bought the house for thirteen-thousand-five-hundred dollars.

In order to make it convenient for Mary, I had a carpenter build a ramp at the rear of the house, so Mary could go in and out of the house on her own. The upstairs had a partially completed apartment, with one bedroom finished. Arthur, Lorna and their baby daughter, Judy, moved upstairs and shared our home for a short while, until they located a more desirable apartment in Oak Park. Arthur worked to make the apartment more livable, and eventually I had a professional builder install a kitchen and an outside entrance to make the apartment complete for our youngest daughter.

Finally, our youngest child, Esther, married her high school sweetheart, Kenneth Oltman, on September 3, 1950. They were married in the First Congregational Church of Oak Park. They lived in the newly completed apartment upstairs for about ten years and had a very close relationship with our family. When Gregg, their third child was born, Esther and Ken bought a home on Wisconsin Avenue, only two blocks away, and we were frequent visitors to their home. Every time we visited, Gregg would ask me to read to him the book, “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves”. It was a ritual with him. After the reading, or when he became tired, he’d say “Gramps, go home now!” Mary and I would get such a chuckle out of that. Connie, the youngest, never wanted to go to school, because she reasoned with us that her grandmother, Thomai, never went to school and Grandma was so smart, so why must she go? I had long discussions with her trying to impress her how important school was, but she wasn’t convinced. All in all, Esther and Ken lived close to us for about 28 years and then had to move to Iowa, because the company he managed, Central Soya Company, closed their doors in Chicago and transferred Ken to Iowa to run their plant there. At present, they are living in a suburb of Dallas, Texas, to be near three of their children who have settled there.

As the years passed by, the Metskas family grew in age, wisdom and grace. Pete and Sohpie were blessed with three beautiful children: Cathy, Claudia and Nickey. They, in turn, provided me with several great grandchildren: Cathy and Nathaniel Fuller have two children, Alex and Amanda; Claudia and Bud Nanney also have two children, Eric and Christopher; and Nickey, as of 1987, is single.

Goerge and Della were blessed with two children, Scott and Nanette. They, in turn, provided me with four great grandchildren. Scott and his wife Sharon have a daughter, Amanda; Nanette and Gerald McCarthy have three children: Sean, Lauren and Collin, who was born this past Christmas Eve, Dec. 24, 1986.

Arthur and Lorna have five children: Judy, Michael, Deborah, Susan and Paula. Judy and Jim Ringer have no children; Michael and Shelley have one daughter, Jeananne; Deborah and Jared Rodin have no children; Susan and Mike Richardson have a son, Adam, and daughter, Stephanie. Paula, the youngest, married Thomas Lange on July 26, 1986, the wedding anniversary of her two uncles, Pete and George.

Esther and Ken have four children: Lisa, Karen, Gregg and Connie. Lisa and Steve Gough have a son, Matthew; Karen and Tom Slott have three children: Kelly, Erin and Colin; Gregg is still single; Connie recently married Timothy Lindsey in February, 1986.

I have fond memories of my grandchildren. I remember while convalescing after having my gall bladder removed at the Oak Park Hospital, Lisa, then eight years old, would walk to the hospital every day, stand on the outside and wave to me.

I am very proud of my fourteen grandchildren and my fifteen great grandchildren, but I'm sure if I live a few more years, I'll have plenty more to brag about. They remain a very close part of the family, and on every family occasion or holiday, they make it a point to visit Thomai, Mary and me, no matter how far away they live. All of my grandchildren are college graduates pursuing their careers, and I'm certain that my great grandchildren will follow in their parents' footsteps. I am extremely proud of every one of them, and each is special to me in a unique way. I can honestly say that I received nothing but respect from all of them. They are beautiful people in my eyes.

Returning to my story, my daughter, Mary, heard of boys returning from the war, who were paralyzed and yet were driving hand-controlled automobiles. As a result, her dream of driving a real automobile was to become a reality.

In 1950 I bought her a Delta 88 Oldsmobile and had the foot controls (brakes, gas pedal) converted into a hand-controlled car. Arthur, her younger brother, was as happy as she when he taught her how to drive it. Mary knew she could always depend on Arthur if she had any difficulty, because he was always there to help her. They were very devoted to each other and that made me very happy. Five years later, 1955, when the car needed new tires, Mary and I went to the Oldsmobile dealer to buy new tires. While in the showroom, we saw a beautiful two-tone blue 98 Oldsmobile coupe, that we couldn't resist looking at. Instead of buying new tires, I bought her a brand new car! She did not expect such a surprise and it was to become her favorite car. In 1963, I bought her a red Cadillac and in 1972, a celery-colored Cadillac coup de ville. Today Mary is driving a 1983 brown Cadillac coupe de ville. I'm very proud to say that Mary is an excellent driver, and has never received a parking or a speeding ticket. Thomai and I enjoyed many trips riding in the front seat with her.

While the rest of my family grew up and married and had families of their own, Mary remained paralyzed, but always cheerful and loving. It did not always go well for her, however. In 1950, because Mary did not feel pain, she developed pressure sores due to sitting for long periods of time in a wheel chair, that required a doctor's care. A friend suggested that we take Mary to Wesley Memorial Hospital in Chicago, which we did, and she stayed there for two weeks until the pressure sores were healed. In the course of healing, the nurses used a heating lamp to heal and dry up the deep ulcers. Mary placed her hand under the lamp and told the nurse it was too hot, but the nurse reassured her that everything was fine. Since Mary had no feeling, the lamp burned her flesh, and blisters appeared on the sore area. She was sent home from the hospital in that condition, and spent from April to September in bed. There was no compensation whatsoever for the neglect of the nurses. My daughter had to spend most of her time in bed on her side and stomach. I was angry and bitter, but at that time I did not know how to make the hospital responsible and pay for their carelessness.

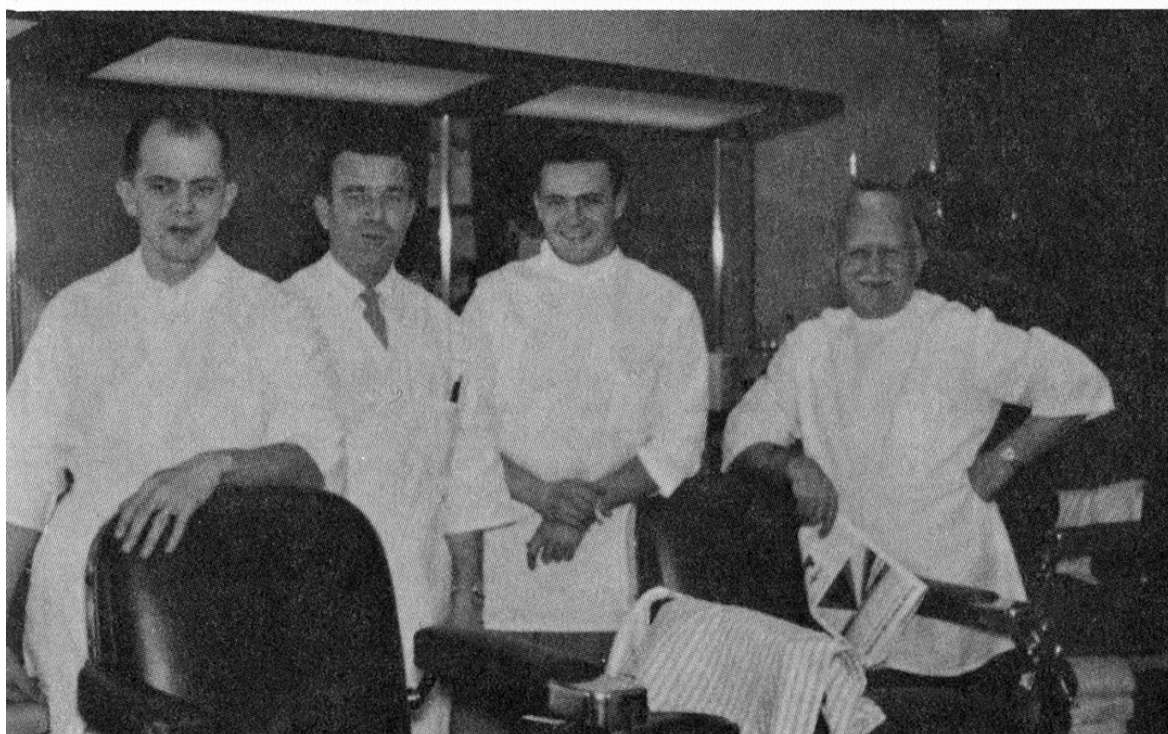
Since my family now was comfortably settled in Oak Park, I decided to sell my Argo property at 6305 Archer Square. The Oil Worker's Union agreed to buy it for a price of twenty-three thousand, five hundred dollars. This was in the year 1954.

For a long time, I did not believe in investing in stocks because I could not afford to take the risk, but when I sold my building, I had a change of heart, because I felt I now was in a position to dabble in the stock market. The banks at that time were not paying a high rate of interest, so I took three thousand dollars with me and went downtown on the Congress L train to see a stock broker. When I asked him what to buy, he simply said “Pepsi”, and I bought two hundred shares. From then on, I became very interested in the stock market. A broker in New York sent me a news letter for one dollar, and each week for four weeks was advised of the best buys in the market. In one of the letters, I was glad to see Pepsi mentioned as a good buy, which made the news letter interesting. The fourth letter mentioned “Opemiska Copper”, and I made an investment in that stock, also. This turned out to be a fantastic investment where I made a lot of money. Since then, I have become fascinated with the stock market and my son, George, has followed in my footsteps and is doing very well.

My investments in the stock market had enabled me to live a better life with less worry about finances. For me, the most important part of the daily paper was the stock market pages. It gave me great satisfaction and enthusiasm. I was now able to buy what the family needed. My wife Thomai and I were in a comfortable position.

In 1956, when I was 65 years old, I planned to retire from my barber shop at 6258 Archer Avenue, where I was renting. Arthur had worked side by side with me since his high school years, and I decided to let him run the business and pay the rent. Arthur’s rent kept increasing considerably, and with the lease about to expire, I considered building my own shop. I owned a lot at 7655 W. 63rd Street, Argo, which was about a block away, and, since I had sufficient cash, decided to construct a building that would consist of two stores... one a barber shop and the other for some other business. Arthur could then move his barber shop into one of the stores, and a currency exchange, owned by Mr. Masters, would be my other tenant. In addition, Mr. Masters offered to install a burglar alarm system in the store at his expense. That made me feel secure and I rented the store to him before it was completed. Both Arthur and he were to pay me one-hundred-fifty dollars a month rent.

Arthur's barber shop was a well-equipped four-chair shop with a wash basin for each chair. It was an impressive looking barber shop with the latest equipment. Arthur had ten profitable years in that shop and employed three other barbers during that time.



Arthur's Barber Shop (1956)
Left to right: Ray Harper, Arthur, Frank Svoba and myself.

Chapter Ten

“Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life” and “The Anniversary Waltz”

On December 26, 1962, Thomai and I celebrated our Golden Wedding Anniversary. Our children secretly planned a large scale celebration to mark our fifty years together, so when the day arrived, Thomai and I were taken by surprise. Thomai, Mary and I were to meet Pete, George, Arthur, Esther and their families for dinner at the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago. When Thomai, Mary and I entered the room, we were greeted by a crowd of people—my children, grandchildren, relatives and old friends, who had been part of our lives for many years. I was especially happy to see Mrs. Lambert, a very close family friend, who made the trip from Cincinnati to be with us. Thomai and I were godparents to her three children, Virginia, Alex and Harry.



Thomai and myself entering room.

Mrs. Aphrodite Lambert, who was known as “Cooma” to our family, brought back many memories. “Butch” Dineff, who operated a butcher shop a few doors away from my barber shop, went to Greece where he married “Cooma” and brought her to live in Argo, near our home. “Cooma” and my wife were always together, like sisters. After the unfortunate death of her husband “Butch” of only a few years, she, with her daughter Virginia and her son Alex, moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where she married a fine young man by the name of William Lambert. They had a son, Harry, and the five of them would come to Argo often to visit us. Because we could not travel as a family with Mary being sick, the Lamberts’ came to Argo for the christening of their son Harry, which was my pleasure. Harry’s father passed away some years later. He would be extremely proud of his son, who has not only grown into a fine young man but also as President of the Eckerd Drug Company, one of the largest chain stores in Florida.

Pete and George entertained everyone at the anniversary party by playing their violins. Thomai and I danced several times to two of our favorite songs, “Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life” and “The Anniversary Waltz”. The occasion was a wonderful, heartwarming, precious affair. I was truly touched, and especially thankful to God for blessing my wife and me with such beautiful children and friends. I was especially honored when asked to say grace and a few words of thanksgiving before dinner.



Standing in back row: Arthur, Judy, Lorna, Michael, Scott, Nanette, Della, George, Pete, Sophie, Gregg (in arms), Ken, Esther, Lisa, Claudia, Cathy. Seated: Michael, Thomai, Mary. In front: Nick, Susan, Debbie, Karen.

Another pleasant surprise was when my brother Nick's son, Stavros, came to visit us from Hungary. We were expecting him but did not know when. Because of his political ideas, Stavros had to leave Greece. Many others like him were displaced and went to live in America, Russia, Poland, and other Eastern European countries. Stavros lived in Hungary, where he made his living as a tailor, and then moved to Yugoslavia. He was a very handsome man, in his early forties, and resembled his father. I took him to visit his father's grave in Elmwood Park, where he opened with a prayer and conversation as though his father was still alive. He talked about his family in Yugoslavia and opened his heart as to his feelings. It was a touching moment.

To celebrate Stavros' visit, we went to Greek town in Chicago, where we enjoyed good food and conversation. We were also entertained by the typical Greek belly dancer, who paid particular attention to our table and stayed until we put some money in her bosom, as was the custom. Stavros enjoyed the evening tremendously and said he was very happy to be with his relatives, and that it was a privilege to be able to visit America.

The sixties, for the barber business, was an era of antiestablishment. Men grew and kept their hair long, curly, braided, or pony-tailed. Many barbers went out of business, or decided to pursue some other career. My son, Arthur, also did not like the idea of working on long hair. He was accustomed to giving a more conservative haircut, such as the ivy league or the crew cut. As a result, he sold half interest in his barber shop to one of his employees, Ed Kutkowski.

Arthur, at this time, was in the process of buying another home. He eventually purchased a beautiful ranch house on the outskirts of Naperville. As he became acquainted with his neighbors, one of them told him of an opening at The Pepperidge Farm Company for a maintenance man on the night shift. Arthur took the job, working at the Pepperidge Farm plant nights and at the barber shop days. He had made an agreement with his partner in the barber shop, that in case he wanted to pull out completely, I would take over his barber chair. When this happened, I began working as a barber in my son's shop.

Arthur would come to the shop for his haircut on his day off and, in turn, he would cut my hair. During one of these visits, I can recall a conversation my son and I had about accidents that were happening at Pepperidge Farm. I advised him to quit and come back to the barber shop, or try his hand in the real estate business. He told me that he was going to stick it out for one more month in order to be eligible for pension benefits, so nothing more was said about it.

Neither Arthur, nor his partner, were entirely satisfied with the barber business, so they decided to sell the shop to two young men. I remained with the new owners to familiarize them with the customers. After they became comfortable with the workings of the shop and the clientele, the fellows had no need for me, so I left the shop. They had operated the shop for about six months, when they phoned me and said that they were having difficulty making ends meet. They wanted out of their lease and offered their fixtures in exchange. I accepted seventeen-hundred dollars for the fixtures, so again at the age of 79, in the year of 1970, I became the sole owner of a barber shop.

To be truthful, I was anxious to get back to full time barbering, for I enjoyed the profession, and I was too active to be just sitting at home. I knew barber methods had changed, so I decided to enroll in a six month hair-styling course during the evenings, a course which was a must if I was to survive in the business. Long hair was still in style. There was a time when long hair was a fad some sixty years ago, so I refused to get excited or nervous over long hair. I would tie pink ribbons in extra long hair as a method of holding the hair down. Wearing ribbons in long hair was the fashion in the days of George Washington and the Revolution of 1775.

The six month course was quite interesting, and I learned new methods of cutting and styling hair. During one of the demonstration classes, the school's model was absent, so I was chosen in his place. The demonstration involved giving me a permanent. So, at the age of 79, white hair and all, I was the owner of wavy, curly hair, which both Mary and Thomai were surprised to see yet kind enough to approve when I arrived home later that day.

I enjoyed working and had a number of experiences that I will never forget. One day while I was alone in the shop, a nicely dressed young man entered. Naturally, I thought he wanted a haircut; instead, he approached me and asked for ten dollars. I said, "Why not go next door to the currency exchange, and they'll help you." He didn't make a move, but said, "Give me two dollars." I was stubborn and refused to give him any money. The next morning, I came to open my shop as usual, and found my two barber poles smashed to the ground. It cost me about two hundred dollars to have the red, white and blue poles repaired. It would have been much cheaper to have given the man the two dollars in the first place.

Another experience involved two brothers, one tall, the other short, who walked into my shop. The shorter fellow wanted his entire head shaved. His bigger brother said to me, "You shave his entire head and I'll kill you!" I didn't know what to do. I tried to reason with both of them, but had no luck. After a little thought, I told the boys I would be right back, and went next door to the currency exchange and phoned the police. I then returned to the shop. Very soon, two policemen came to the shop and asked me what the problem was. After hearing the story, the officer turned to the shorter fellow

and asked, "What do you want Mike to do?" He told the officer that he wanted his whole head shaved, so the policeman said to me, "Mike, shave his head!" I did, was paid five dollars for the shave, and the two brothers left peacefully. I thanked the policeman for getting me out of a jam.

On another occasion, while I was giving a young man a shaggy haircut, a couple came into the shop and asked the price of a hair style. I quoted them seven-fifty and they walked out of the shop. The customer getting the shaggy cut heard me quote the price and started complaining and shouted, "You ruined my hair. I'll throw you out the window and sue you for every penny you have!" With my previous experience in handling such customers, I said, "I'll be right back," and once again, went next door to phone the police. When I returned, there was no one in the shop. I had been outsmarted... the fellow got a free haircut.

I went to work as usual on Saturday morning, April 6, 1974. While I was reading the *Chicago Tribune*, my son-in-law, Ken, came into the barber shop. I was surprised to see him, for he and his family were supposed to leave for Florida for a week's vacation. He approached me and asked me how I felt. I answered, "Fine." Then, he asked me if I was strong enough to hear some bad news. I asked "How bad?" and he replied, "Very bad." I blurted out, "Give me the bad news now."

"Your son, Arthur, is dead." I was stunned. "My son DEAD? Did he suffer? What happened?"

Ken assured me that Arthur didn't suffer. He had been killed instantly while repairing a huge oven door at Pepperidge Farm.

George, my second son, came with Ken but stayed in the car because he just could not break the news to me. After he saw Ken explain, he rushed over to my shop; we embraced each other and I tried to comfort him by saying I was sorry that he had lost his brother. I closed the shop and the three of us walked out to the car.

The reality of the accident suddenly hit me, and right there on the street, I

cried out, “Arthur, Arthur”. I felt like King David mourning for his son, Absalom.

As soon as I walked into my home, I realized that Thomai and Mary had already been told the dreadful news. Thomai and I embraced each other as we shared our sorrow for our dead son. My brother Spiro, his wife together with their son, Tom and his wife Dolores, came quickly to offer their sympathy.

That evening, Thomai, Mary and I drove to Naperville to be with Arthur’s wife, Lorna, and their children during this sorrowful time. I felt that I had to be strong for all of them. I took full responsibility for planning my son’s funeral. Arthur’s son, Mike, arrived from Annapolis the next day, and I was especially proud of him, for he, too, was very courageous and was a strength for his mother.

It was very difficult for all of us after the funeral, but we had to carry on the daily activities of living as best as we could. Michael graduated from Annapolis that June and I’m sure his Dad was there with him in spirit. Lorna held up beautifully during the ceremony and I was by her side with her girls, very proud of her. Lorna and the children have remained a close part of our family. She never remarried and a week never goes by that she doesn’t call or come to visit me.

I was very fortunate to have a lawyer in the Metskas family. My brother Spiro’s son, Tom, was a great help to me when my son Arthur was killed. He was able to reach a proper settlement with the company where Arthur worked. Ever since that time, Tom has helped me with many legal problems.

A year later, our family shared another sad and heart-breaking experience. George’s wife, Della, had been ailing with cancer for a number of years, and was in and out of the hospitals. She experienced many bad days, but had good days while the cancer was in remission. During those five years, George did his very best to keep Della alive. He took her to specialists, healers and spiritualists, hoping for a cure. George took Della to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, where he thought she could receive the best possible treatment. I understood what George was going through for I experienced

that hurt and pain of doing all I could when my daughter, Mary, took sick, and who still remains in a wheelchair. Della eventually died of complications from a brain tumor on May 15, 1975. George and Della were a lovely couple and all of us missed her very much when she passed away.

There was a happy occasion for me in the year 1976. I was extremely pleased to be honored with the “Man of the Year” award on January 24th, given in recognition of dedicated humanitarian service to the youth, aged, and citizens of Summit. This honor was bestowed on me at a Chamber of Commerce dinner. It came to me as a complete surprise, but not to my family, who knew about it ahead of time, and kept the coming event a secret.



Mike Metskas, Pioneer Barber, Named Summit Man Of Year

Civic awards were the theme of the Argo-Summit Chamber of Commerce 20th annual installation and dinner dance, Saturday, Jan. 24th.

The chamber officials originated a civic award to present to an outstanding businessman who booster the image of the community by improvement of his property in addition to a fine service.

The civic award was presented to Mr. and Mrs. A. Rizzi of the Famous Restaurant, 6159 S. Archer Road, for enhancing the business district by remodeling both the inside and outside of their restaurant as well as offering a valuable service and a fine cuisine. The restaurant is noted for its homemade style foods as well as state acclaimed for cleanliness.

Then the chamber presented its "Man of the Year" award to Mike Metskas, operator of the barbershop at 7655 W. 63rd street in recognition of conducting a business in the community for over 60 years.

Mike is now 84. Few ever notice his age since Mike kept in top physical trim. Mike began his barbershop in Summit in 1914 when the community was first undergoing its growth.

The section, known as "Argo" was a portion of the holding of Corn Products plant. When the Argo plant was constructed in 1907 it was believed that a community such as Pullman should exist. At the corner of 63rd and Archer stands a building with the inscription "bank", now the business site of John Muros Realty and Southwest Accounting service.

The 1907 depression killed the idea. The building was first utilized as offices for the Corn Products plant. The name "Argo" was selected after a product brand name.

Due to the volume of mail the plant succeeded in securing its own post office, naming it "Argo". The name still remains despite the fact that the Argo subdivision was annexed to the

village of Summit by vote in 1911. To this day, many are confused over the designation of "Summit" and "Argo", believing them two villages.

Mike established a barbershop on the west side of Archer when a young man. He later conducted a soda pop business together with Walter Durka, who ran a butcher and grocery store on the east side of Archer. This enterprise failed due to the water taste in this area.

Mike operated his barber business thru two great depressions, and two great World Wars plus many minor recessions. He holds his best year as 1925 when five barbers were under his supervision.

Mike retired twice, but could not face leaving his many patrons during the past decade. He still can be found ready to cut hair in his shop now at 7655 W. 63rd street resting on his laurels as the oldest businessman in the community still operating his business and now as the "Man of the Year."

On February 27, 1976, I opened the local newspaper, the Desplaines Valley News, and noticed the following article saluting my 60 years of doing business in the community. It brought back memories of my association with several of my business friends.

A Salute To Summit Pioneer Barber Mike Metskas

Few Summit merchants can match the record of Mike Metskas, now 84, operator of the barber shop at 7655 W. 63rd street, who counts a total of 60 years in business within the community, a record matched by only one other merchant, Jim Gleatis, 6249 Archer rd, the proprietor of the export-import gift shop, whom this writer will interview next week.

Barber Mike Metskas established his shop at 6258 Archer road on December 15 in 1914, purchasing the business from a Mr. O'Brien who conducted a barber shop at the address for five years prior to 1914, when Argo subdivision was envisioned as a "boom town" similar to the Pullman section of Chicago, as the world's largest refinery, Corn Products Co., started construction of its plant at 65th and Archer.

Mike arrived from Macedonia, Turkey now a portion of Greece at the age of 16, needing just an address and a \$5.00 gold piece to establish himself in the land of opportunity, America. He borrowed that \$5.00 gold piece at 7% interest.

This was the period when wages were 10 cents an hour and the top salary \$1.00 per day. Mike began working as a bottler in a Pepsi bottle plant and went to evening school to learn the trade of barbering and the English language.

Few Merchants Survive

There were few merchants in Argo area at the time, only a few descendants of the period still operate a business in the community, such as George Stone, the Durkas, the Radtkes, the Kotzs, the Desplaines Valley News publication, the Sobiesks and one or two others. This publication will disclose others in future issues.

Mike Metskas opened his barber shop in 1914 and by 1916 earned enough to return to Greece to bring a wife on his return. He resided in the area known as "company houses" within the area west of the Graves school along the Belt railroad tracks.

Lazo Dineff, brother of Chris Dineff, established a butcher shop near the barber shop. The area business was good since two theatres, one at the site of what was the Service Savings and Loan building, and the other on the Times Square corner at 63rd and Archer, were operating.

Metskas at one time owned what is now the CIO office portion of the building at 63rd and Archer.

Family Growth

The couple became parents of three sons and two daughters, which family has now expanded to a total of 15 grandchildren and one great grandchild. One son, Peter, is music director in the Elmwood Park school district, another son, George, is music director in the Berwyn school district. The third son was killed in a tragic accident while working as a maintenance man at Pepperidge Bakery, having an oven door fall on his head while repairing the door.

1925 Best Year

Mike went thru several depressions, recessions and two great wars while in business. His best business year was in 1925 when he employed a total of five barbers in his shop.

Barbering at first was a respectable trade, for men went to the barber to get a smooth shave and none did the job as well as Metskas. Mike seldom does any shaving now, for the invention of the safety razor, and then the electric shaver,

made shaving a washroom chore in the home. Mike still can shave, but finds few patrons wanting a shave.

His worst year is this year, 1975, for the long hair and whiskers introduced by the Beatles, has put many barbers out of business. Mike at first believed the long hair a fad, but it seems that the fad has appeal and males are growing hair as long as the women.

Hair Styling

Just so the youngsters under 80 reading this won't be disappointed, Mike is also an expert in hair styling and can customize the mustache, the one remaining ornament men can sport without the liberated woman doing the same.

Mike recalls the early days in Argo when the 63rd and Archer corner was the amusement center of the farming area about.

When the Desplaines Valley News opened business by Joseph Picarsky in the bank corner now the site of Riccardo's Men's Store, George Sobieski, Sr established his first undertaker parlor downstairs. Upstairs was the hospital clinic operated by Mrs. Rose De-Krauzer.

Mike holds this made things rather convenient since when workers shot each other up on paydays, the clinic was rather busy upstairs. Some perished, giving business to the basement. The Desplaines Valley News in the center, printed the details.

Mike retired once several years ago, but found that he missed his friends and neighbors, so returned to his shop once again. You'll find him in his building daily, until 3 p.m. when another barber takes over. Ask for a shave and haircut and watch his eyes beam.

About this time, Thomai was having trouble with her health. She couldn't cope with the loss of Arthur. She began losing her sight and wasn't able to take care of Mary the way she had for so many years. With two sick women at home, I was truly very fortunate to have a wonderful neighbor and friend living next door, by the name of Mary Carlson. I just could not manage alone with Thomai sick and Mary needing care. Mary Carlson would come to our house whenever we needed her. There were days upon days when she would spend several hours, helping with breakfast, dinner, taking care of Mary, cleaning the house, etc. She eventually came over every morning at nine o'clock and stayed until about four in the afternoon, when her husband, Frank, returned from work. I can't thank Frank Carlson, Mary's husband, enough for being such a wonderful man. He did not mind Mary coming over, and he also helped in many ways. Being neighbors for at least twenty-five years, you can imagine how sad we were when Mary and Frank decided to retire in Minnesota. On occasion, Mary and Frank would visit us, and to this day we telephone each other on a regular basis. I remember Mary in my prayers every day.

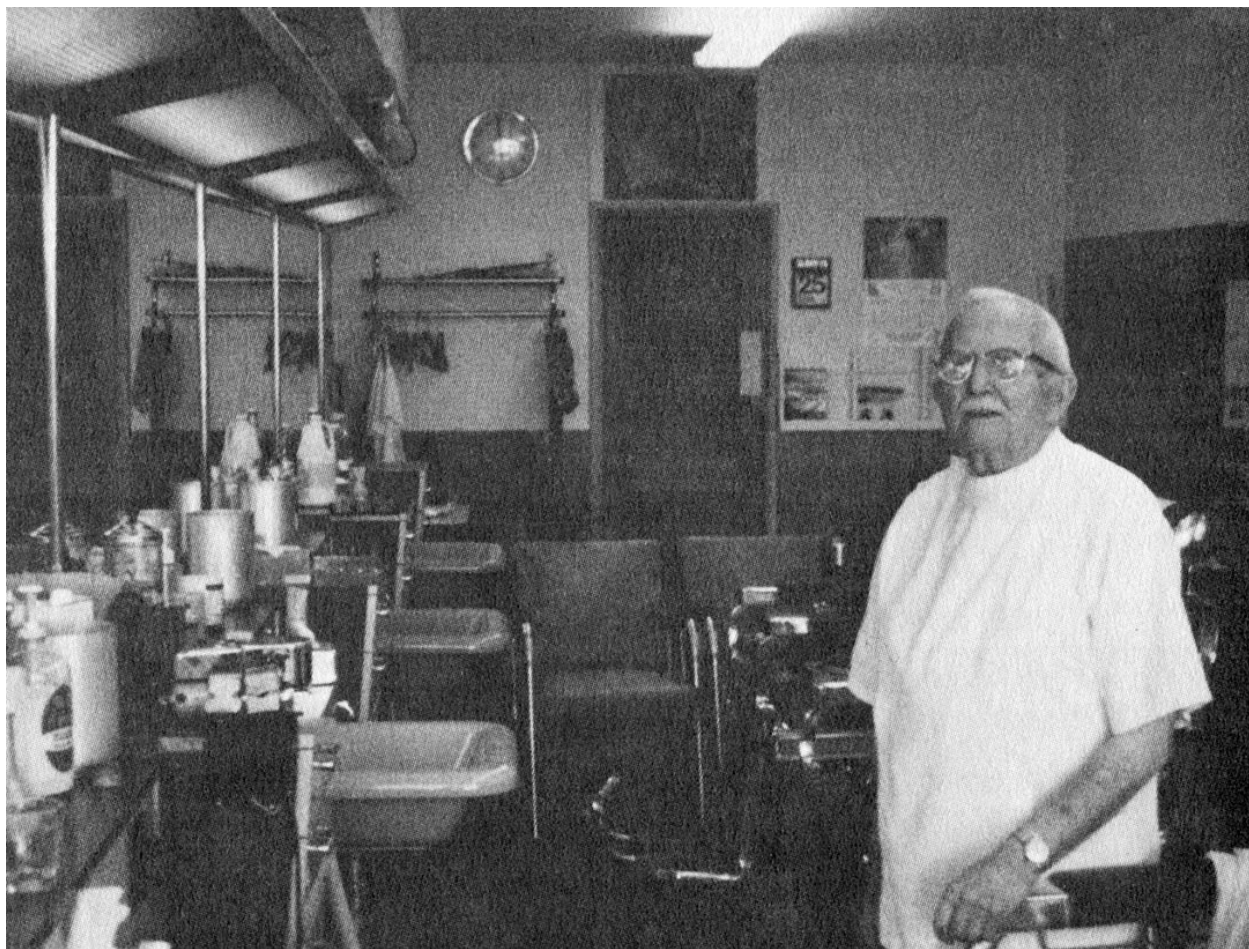
It was hard for me to see my wife suffering. She was 85 years old when the doctor discovered a growth in her nasal pharynx area. After taking a biopsy, the tumor was diagnosed as malignant and cobalt treatments were started. I often wonder if the extensive series of cobalt treatments contributed to her loss of eyesight and to her weakened condition. She had a lot of pain and had great difficulty in walking. She finally had to be taken to the hospital. At least there she could receive help to relieve some of her suffering, by the use of drugs to help kill the pain. She was in the hospital for about three-and-a-half weeks. One evening shortly before her death, I asked her to say something to me. She answered "Why doesn't God take me?" Her question broke my heart. I was very discouraged... a nurse tried to comfort me. I told her, "I courted and loved my wife for sixty-eight years, and now she's dying." The nurse stood by quietly and wept with me. The next morning, I returned to the hospital, but Thomai was not able to talk, so I sat for awhile in silence, then kissed her and left. On my way home, my daughter Mary received a telephone call from the hospital that Thomai had just died. That was Monday, August 4, 1980. The only woman I ever loved had died.

The death of my wife drained me physically as nothing before. I began to experience my own health problems. My eyesight deteriorated to the point that I found it necessary to sell the barber shop. I could no longer give good haircuts and shaves.

In 1980, after holding the title as Summit's oldest merchant and barber, I closed my shop at 7655 W. 63rd Street, after 66 years of business in that community. I sold my fixtures to another barber near by, by the name of Wheeler-Parker, and rented the empty store to the Argo-Summit Chamber of Commerce. Eventually, I sold my building and was relieved of paying taxes and caring for the property. I'd like to quote here what a wonderful person in Bedford Park, Bessie Gieseler, wrote about me, and my retirement in the paper:

Let's turn the pages back to 1914. I was working for Lazo Dineff in his grocery store and next door was another shop run by a very fine gentleman. He was a barber. Everyone called him Mike, for he was highly respected. You would hear people say, "Hello, Mike, how are you today?" And he would answer back with a large smile, "Fine." Mike barbered for many years and had many customers and friends. When the day came that he said he was going to retire, many hearts were sad, because they loved Mike dearly. But they wished him God's blessing.

I was deeply touched by her tribute.



After 66 years in business I closed my shop—1980.

Mike Metskas Relates Growth Of Argo Area

Those persons that have an interest in the past history of the Argo portion of Summit village's development, better exchange views with Mike Metskas, village barber at 7655 W. 63rd street, who arrived in Argo subdivision in 1914. This was shortly after the establishment of Corn Products refining plant nearby the intersection of 63rd street and Archer road in 1904-1908.

Haircut Costs Up

While haircut prices are currently \$5.00, when Mike opened his shop at what was then a bustling corner at 63rd and Archer in 1914, over 65 years ago, the price was 25 cents for a haircut and 15 cents for a shave.

Mike opened his shop on the west side of Archer where a large movie house existed, later demolished by fire. Mike recalls 63rd street as being little more than a rutted wagon path with a large drainage ditch existing on the south side of the street. Few buildings existed between Archer east to Clearing district in that year.

Archer avenue was first a dirt road which the Indian tribes utilized to reach the Desplaines river for trading purposes. In 1831, Archer was the first road southwest of Chicago in Cook county. It was named Archer after Colonel Archer, an army engineer designated by the federal government to dig the route of the Illinois-Michigan canal.

It cost \$40,000 to construct the road, secured from the Illinois-Michigan Canal funds. Col. Archer used gravel from the nearby Lawndale avenue quarries to provide the roadway base.

In 1840, wooden planks were utilized to remedy the problem of water drainage on the road. Sudden rain storms often made the road impassable for men on horses to travel. The wood plank road section in Chicago ended at Western avenue. The first toll road was that from Summit to Plainfield on what is now I-55.

It was the stagecoach which thundered down 55th first to provide

transportation southwest before the introduction of the steam engine. Early travel was by canoe and horse and wagon.

Street Car In 1899

Electric street car service was added in 1899 and Archer avenue in Summit was brick paved. Early Summit volunteer firemen records disclose that the Lawndale hill north of 55th was rather steep for its first motorized engine to overcome, so the fire engine was hitched to the first available street car to reach the farm homes south of 55th.

The 63rd and Archer corner was booming, as it was the gathering site for hundreds of laborers working along the Illinois-Michigan Canal, and as a stopping place for farmers taking grain and hay to the Stickney stockyards feeding area east of Harlem, which is now Clearing District and Burbank and Nottingham Park communities.

It cost 5 cents to travel from Chicago at Cicero avenue to Willow Springs and about 20 cents to reach Joliet, then "Juliett." It was Corn Products firm that convinced Chicago Surface Lines firm to lay a track from Narragansett to its plant doors in 1904 where the ramp now exists.

The street car line originated at Cicero avenue went down Archer to Lawndale where it had one spur south and one north across the canal to Ogden avenue.

In 1911, a route was added to 63rd place from Central avenue to Archer passing to the rear of the current Argo High school property. A cutback occurred in 1929 when the workers shuttle car services went into effect. Buses were added in 1948 and the trolley line abandoned and sold.

The street car made two trips daily each morning and two in the evening just for Corn Products employees. Otherwise it went from Ogden avenue in Lyons village to Archer in Summit, halting at the top of the hill.

Thus the corner of 63rd and Archer was the site for expansion of Summit village.

Theater An Attraction

When Mike Metskas, now age 89, no doubt the oldest barber still in business in Cook county, established his shop, he recalled the Argo Theatre building at the southwest corner of 63rd and Archer where a tavern now exists. This theatre was demolished by fire in 1923.

It was constructed by P. L. Knoedler in 1910, and managed by a Mr. Campbell and William Altier. Admission was 5 cents. William Altier and P. L. Knoedler were among the founders of the present Argo State Bank. More about the two theatres in later historical sketches.

Argo Grand Theatre, operated by Joseph and Sam Learner, was established in 1920. Silent movies were the rage with Mabel Beebe at the organ.

In the corner theatre building existed a bowling alley, a restaurant, and a hotel, along with a realty office. Argo subdivision lots were offered at \$499 each by Knoedler with financing arranged by Argo State Bank.

The large two story building on the northeast corner currently known as the Strzelczyk building, previously occupied partly by a tavern and now the Southwest Accounting Services at 63rd and Archer, was the first large commercial building on the street, constructed in 1908.

Two Hospitals Existed

It housed the bank facilities on the first floor, and a hospital operated by Rose DeKrauze on the second floor. Facing 63rd street, east of the corner were the first offices of this publication, the Desplaines Valley News which opened publication in 1914.

A depression following the war forced the bank to sell this building and move across the street to another building, now a medical clinic.

Below the Desplaines Valley News in 1914 existed a funeral business, the first in the Argo subdivision, operated by George Sobiesk, Sr. Besides the hospital operated by Rose DeKrauze, another

hospital existed, that operated by the Holy Family of Nazareth in the 7600 block of 61st place. That hospital building was later converted into two separate family homes.

On the northwest corner, now a vacant lot, stood a tavern and a hotel operated by Dick Lambert, Sr. Then the Dineff Brothers market, and the Metskas barber shop and newsstand facility. Mike worked from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily. Newspapers were delivered from Chicago via the street cars.

It was Metskas who constructed the two story building now occupied by the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union offices in 1921. Mike sold the building to the union in 1950, then moved to Oak Park village.

A barrack-type building housing mainly Corn Products workers existed east a few vacant lots away, near the present barber shop. A tiny shanty was down the street, near the present liquor store, owned by Burg. In 1915, Burg established a drug store near the Argo Bank, later the business was shifted to the Strzelczyk corner. There Jay-Pee Jewelry was established.

The Lambert building was constructed about 1932. This building is now occupied by a wood cabinet making shop, and a car repair facility.

The Stone Brothers began its operations in 1908 in a site now occupied by Central Liquors, and later built its present building. The two brothers, Nathan A. Stone and Harry L. Stone, contributed much to Summit's civic life.

Above historical sketches developed from interviews of Mike Metskas, age 89, oldest businessman in the village and no doubt the lone barber of that age still in business after retiring twice in entire Cook county, if not Illinois and the nation.

A salute to Mike when you pass by his shop, for Mike finds business rather slow now with youngsters growing long hair and beards.

— Author Harry Sklenar

The above article appeared in the local area newspaper, the Desplaines Valley News, on July 17, 1980.

Chapter Eleven

“Journey to Eternity”

In 1982, I had severe pains in my head. I consulted a specialist, who prescribed the necessary medicine to allow me to attend my grandson Michael’s wedding in Santa Ana, California, with Lorna and her family. Mike met and fell in love with a fine young lady, Michelle Johnson, while residing in California where he was working. I was thrilled to be asked to say grace before the dinner at the wedding reception. I was treated like a celebrity as I walked up to the microphone. I enjoyed the attention, and it was a wonderful experience for me. Many people at the wedding reception paid me wonderful compliments for they said I looked very good for my ninety-two years. When people asked me what my secret was, I told them “I don’t fool around”. That created quite a response from the audience. When I returned to Chicago, I was met at the O’Hare Airport by George and Mary and told them of my happy experience.

I now live in Oak Park with my daughter, Mary. While most of the time Mary enjoyed good health, she did have a rather serious mishap in March, 1985. Attempting to get into her wheelchair, her left leg was caught between the arm rest and the seat, and in trying to free herself, fractured her leg. She was unaware of this, because she has no feeling there. A few days later, the nurse who took care of Mary noticed that her knee cap was red and swollen and recommended that she go to the hospital for x-rays. My son, Peter, who was at my home at the time, dialed 911 and paramedics came in an ambulance and took her to the hospital for an examination. There she spent two-and-a-half weeks and was fitted with a leg brace that she had to wear for several months. During her two-and-a-half week stay in the hospital, I lived with my son Pete and his wife, Sophie, at their home. They were extremely good to me, and the three of us would visit Mary every day. When Mary came home from the hospital, it was a happy day for all of us.

There are a few more experiences to share with you. If it were up to me, I’d still be working at the barber shop, but time has a way of catching up with us, and at the age of ninety my eyesight was really poor. I am only able to read

print with large letters and I carry a magnifying glass with me at all times. The loss of my ability to read has been traumatic for me, because all of my life, reading the Holy Scripture, the life of Christ and anything pertaining to the Bible, gave me peace of mind. At times when I was unable to sleep, I would get up and read the Bible.

My daughter Mary, knowing how important reading was to me, enrolled me in the Library of Congress Program for the Blind and Handicapped. This program provided me with a cassette player and a journal that lists all of the books, magazines and any type of literature available on cassettes. I especially treasure listening to cassettes of the Old and New Testaments that were given to me as a Christmas gift by my children.

I have recorded on tape my favorite folksongs of my childhood, in three different languages: Greek, Slavic and Albanian. I sometimes sing along with the tape and it's very common for me to break into song and dance in my home. It brings back beautiful memories of my childhood in Slimnitsa.

For diversion, I try my luck at playing the Illinois lottery. On one occasion I used the numbers from the teachings of St. Paul. "Come boldly to the throne of God that you may obtain mercy and find grace in this time of need." Mary and I would compare certain numbers for certain letters and we played numbers 15, 17, 19, 22, 27 and 32. I had Mary print the numbers in large print so that I could read and memorize them. Since I knew the numbers by memory, I was thrilled when I saw five of the six numbers flashed on the TV screen. Of course, I was hoping for the 6th number to win the lottery, but the five numbers gave me a prize of nine hundred and ninety-four dollars.

I have many grandchildren and I attend all their weddings. Several of them were married in the Chicago area; others were married out of town. Mary and I looked forward to the possibility of going to Dallas, Texas, for my granddaughter Connie's wedding, but it would be difficult for just the two of us to make the trip. We telephoned our neighbor in Minnesota, Mary Carlson, and asked if she would be willing to accompany us. She said that she would be happy to and that her husband Frank had no objection. I sent Mary airplane tickets, with a stopover in Chicago, and the three of us would then

continue our flight to Dallas. It was a most enjoyable visit for all of us, and an added pleasant surprise to see “Cooma” (Mrs. Lambert) at the wedding.

Now I stay home, take walks when the weather permits and appreciate God’s beauty in nature. I listen and enjoy my cassettes and watch TV game shows through my huge magnifying glass positioned in front of the TV. I thank God for my ninety-five fruitful years. I have truly been blessed with a wonderful wife of so many years, who always gave me support and encouragement. I have also been blessed with children who grew up to be fine Christian men and women, of whom I am very proud.

Now I’ve nearly reached the end of my journey to eternity! I have had an avalanche of memories dating back to my youth. Some of my experiences I have shared with you, but it would take many pages in several books to complete all the thoughts and ideas that still lie hidden in my heart and mind, all those wonderful memories that remind me of who I really am, why I am here on earth and where I am going.

My favorite Bible verses that I have memorized in Greek and English are from the Book of Psalms: Numbers 1, 23, 51, 52 and 103. Although I have lost my reading ability due to my poor eyesight, I am grateful that I have been able to memorize them so that I can recite them whenever I choose.

Other verses below, that are also favorites of mine are from I Thessalonians, Chapter 4, verses 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18:

“For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.”

“For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep.”

“For the Lord himself shall descend from Heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first.”

“Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.”

“Wherefore comfort one another with these words.”

I’ve chosen to call this book “Journey to Eternity” for I feel that my future is not death, but life. I feel that the living saints with the dead saints will be resurrected with Christ to rule the world for a thousand years to come. After a thousand years, there will be a last resurrection to judge all mankind. Those who lived and believed in Christ will live forever. There will never be an end; just eternity, so our journey to eternity is forever. Through this book, those I have loved will live on in the hearts and minds of the people who have shared in my life’s experiences and who read these pages.

So it will be that even when I am no longer here to share their lives, we will all be together in spirit.

“First the thorns, and then the Crown!”

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